25¢

ALL-STORY LOVE

JUNE

HEARTBREAK Bargain

by RUTH HERBERT

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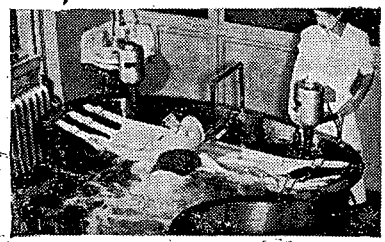

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25¢ ALL-STORY

LOVE

Volume 119, No. 2 June, 1950

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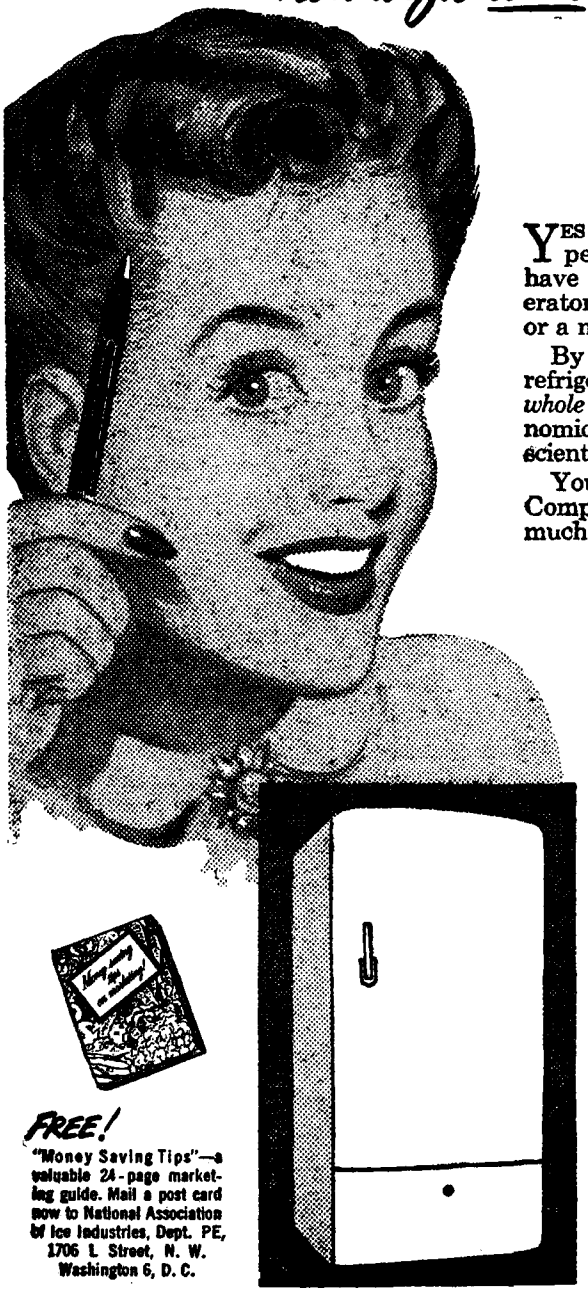
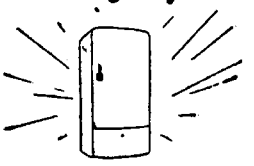
I've figured out a way to get a new sofa and a new refrigerator!





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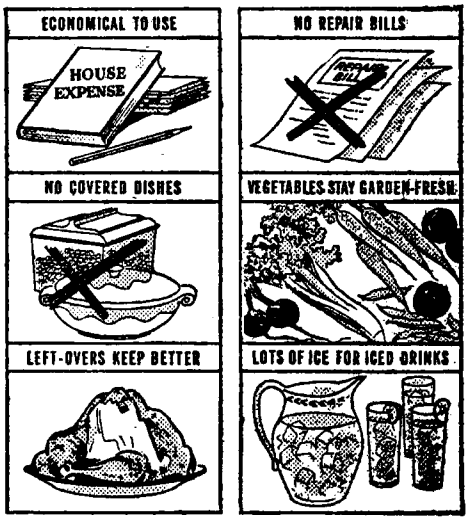

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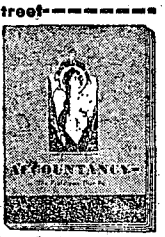

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A-2585 COAL CAMPER

I am a fourteen year old girl and go to high school. I also live in a coal camp. My favorite sports are tennis and basketball, also like football. Would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world who are about my age.

Janie

A-2586 CALLING FARMERETTES

A salesman working in a new territory would like to make new friends. I am a thirty-six year old man, five feet eight. Love dogs and other animals. Would like to hear from girls who like country life and animals. Like books, music, and shows.

Slim

A-2587 SINCERE

Here is a twenty-seven year old nurse who is sincere, honest and friendly. I love dogs and have a beautiful Russian Semode that has won many ribbons. I like to write letters and receive them, especially from others as lonely as I. Am five feet six. Like music, collect records, like sports.

Lynne

A-2588 GIRLS ESPECIALLY!

Although I've been in California only a short while, I don't have many friends because my job keeps me busy. Am a twenty-six year old fellow, six feet tall with blondish curly hair. Am an ex-Guadalcanal vet. Will answer all.

California

(Please turn to page 8)

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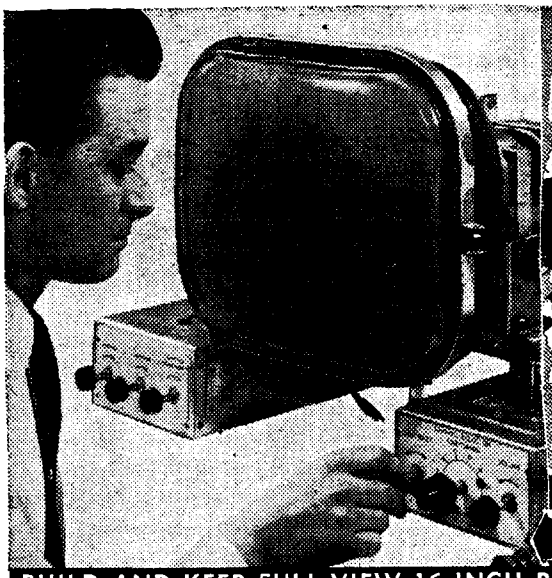

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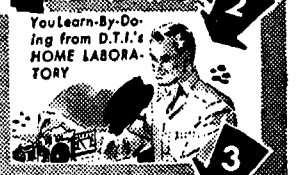

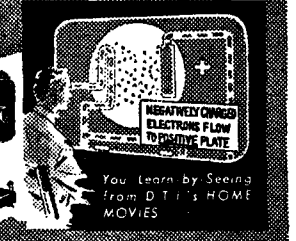

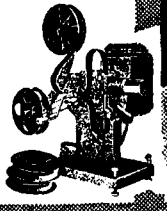

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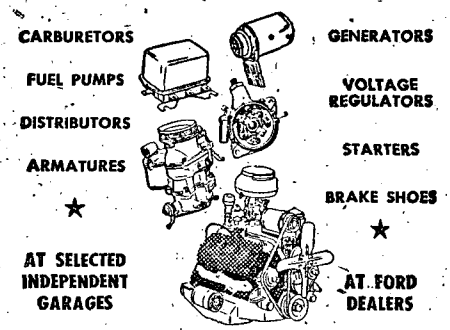

FORD Division of FORD MOTOR COMPANY

(Continued from page 6)

A-2589 CITY GIRL

Have you ever heard of a lonesome city girl? Well, this eighteen year old blonde, five feet two with blue eyes, is. I love to travel and collect postcards, also love swimming and dancing. Would some of you tall, blond, handsome fellas care to write?

Frani

A-2590 WOODWORKER

I am a thirty-nine year old man, six feet one and a half inches tall. My hair is dark brown, eyes blue and am of Swedish descent. Woodworking is my hobby, also like movies, fishing. Would like very much to hear from girls twenty-five and up.

Freddie

A-2591 A NEIGHBOR

How about keeping up the good neighbor policy. Am a young Canadian girl of twenty-two, am five feet seven and a half, have brown hair and eyes. Would like to hear from men and women all over. Will exchange snaps and promise to answer all.

Bunny

A-2592 FAR AWAY

Here goes! I am a fifteen year old girl with red hair and green eyes and I live in South Africa. I adore all sports, especially hockey and softball, also like ice skating and movies. Want pals my age.

Biddy

(5c postage)

A-2593 EX-PATTONITE

I am a young man of twenty-six, six feet tall, have dark hair and blue eyes. Served with General Patton in Europe and saw most of the cities in Europe. I like to fish, hike, camp out, wrestle, collect stamps and coins. Don't get much mail, but hope to.

Len

A-2594 LEFTY

This twenty-three year old girl, a south paw, likes to write letters, listen to music and go to movies. Made good grades at school but didn't finish and am very sorry now. Would like to hear from people, anyone, anywhere and soon.

Marge

A-2595 DISC COLLECTOR

Here is a twenty-five year old man with brown hair and blue eyes, five feet eight inches tall. I like all sports. My chief hobby is collecting phonograph records. Like dancing and movies and making friends. Want pals around my age.

George

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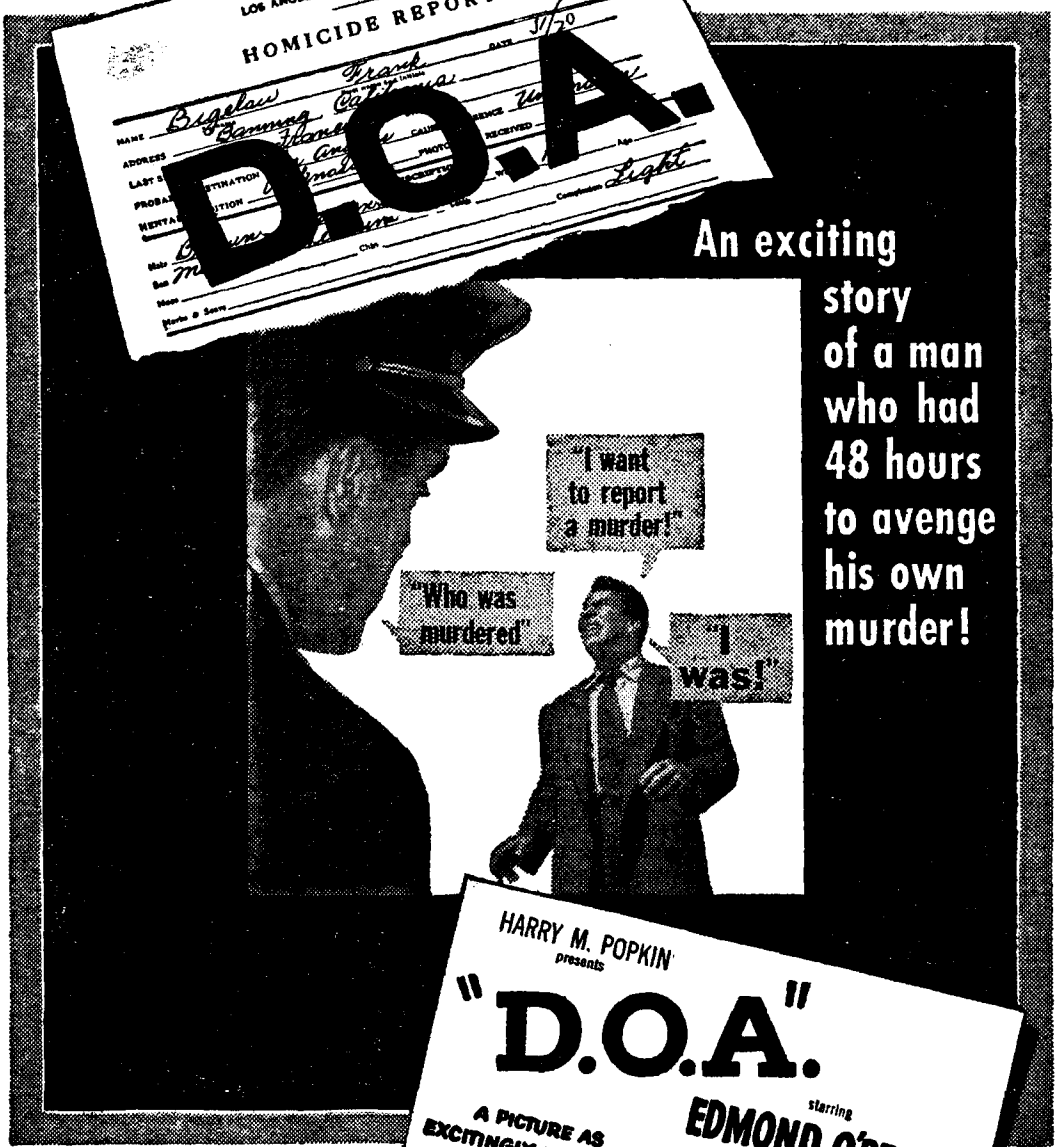
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About All-Story

By CHARLES B. POSTL

"Rex Beach's place is just five blocks from our home, my friend wrote, and if you come to Sebring to visit me, I promise to introduce you to him, for I've become well acquainted with him since I've moved here." That was the lure that sent me southward to Florida a few winters before the war.

Finally I arrived, and eventually my friend kept his word. Mr. Beach must have been imposed upon by only too many budding writers by that time, but he certainly didn't let me know it. He was patience and kindness itself. I listened eagerly to everything he had to tell me, and one afternoon had the privilege of visiting with him in his amazing garden, where he proudly pointed out the tropical plants he grew there.

Later during my stay in Florida, and following through with Mr. Beach's suggestion that I "soak up local color wherever I go," I took long drives into the surrounding countryside. I grew familiar with the tropical, government-protected hammock near Sebring, the groves of citrus trees lining the highway to Palm Beach, and the mysterious, awesome Everglades that crept all the way to Okeechobee.

Between Sebring and Clewiston, at the very edge of the 'glades, I discovered a small colony of northerners all bursting with the creative spirit. There was nothing impressive about the place really, just a few frame cottages clustered at a crossroad. But the energy and enthusiasm of the group was contagious, and I found myself driving out there time and again to see the beginning writers and artists.

During one of these visits I noticed a small, dark haired girl who walked with a decided limp. She lived alone in one of the smaller cottages that was set slightly apart from the rest. She kept mostly to herself, rarely spoke to anyone even when she stopped in the crossroad's store.

The storekeeper told me one day that she had been well on the way to becoming a famous ballerina when an automobile accident had cancelled that career by leaving her with a permanent ankle injury. So courageously she had turned her creative bent to ceramics, joined the colony, and earned her living by fashioning strikingly individual pieces of pottery.

I think the plot germ for *Hideaway* must have been born on that hot, lulling afternoon in the dusty, general store, only to be neglected and forgotten these many years.

However, one blustery Chicago day this winter, my mind slipped back to that Florida vacation. I shut my eyes and again saw the stark silhouette of the coconut palms etched against a cloudless sky; felt the velvety vermillion of the hibiscus blooms crowding the walk; and remembered once more the incredible, extravagant beauty of the rows of poinciana trees in bloom, marching down the road like flaming umbrellas raised to the sun.

I knew that the next to last big Florida "blow" had completely wiped out the little colony, but that knowledge didn't deter me now. I kept recalling the lovely, dark haired girl who had so mysteriously kept to herself in her little cottage at the edge of the glades. And as I began to eagerly make notes for my story it was she who eventually became the heroine of *Hideaway*.

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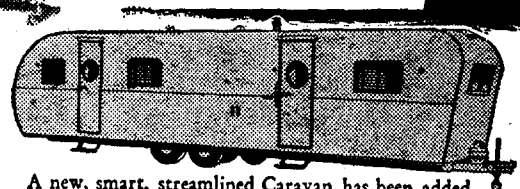

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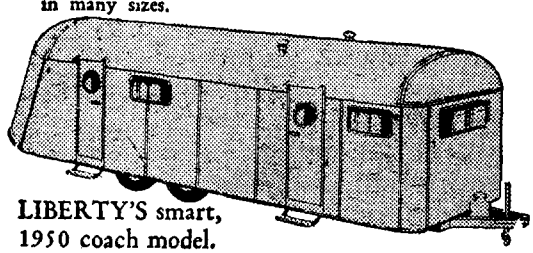

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By
RUTH HERBERT

Heartbreak Bargain

Velvet was too young to know that her bargain with destiny would deny her a woman's birthright—love!

VELVET was making her nightly tour of inspection. She passed through the gambling rooms without a glance—they were Monte's responsibility. Except for one hour, from eleven until midnight, she paid no attention to the huge, ornate rooms where millionaires and their companions could amuse themselves by dropping a fortune on the turn of a wheel or the cut of a card.

She went into the dining room, with its magnificent crystal chandaliers that were museum pieces, its priceless antique mahogany sideboards that were period pieces, the tables with their snowy damask and their silver epergnes filled with fresh flowers and hot-house fruits. The dining room looked more than anything else like the dining room of the governor's mansion at Williamsburg. It had been Velvet's idea to make it look like that and it was her job to see that the illusion was

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"This is a real proposal," Kevin said cynically. "You have two witnesses. What do you say?"

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kept intact and inviolable. Monte lost thousands of dollars every year on the dining room—and said it was worth every penny. It was one of the reasons why Monte's Monte Carlo was the show place of Nevada. The other reason was that his roulette wheel was honest.

She made a slight re-arrangement of the flowers on the round center table that was set for twelve, moved a crystal goblet the fraction of an inch, while Frost, the head waiter, hovered anxiously.

"Is everything all right, Miss Velvet?"

"Everything's perfect, Frost. By the way, who has the round table tonight?"

Frost answered, but she did not listen. She wasn't interested. It was only a prelude for the next question.

"And the other reservations for tonight?"

It came, after a while, the name she was expecting.

"And at the press table will be Carr Ryding, Tish Cabaniss, Merry Woods, Hy Fernham and Kevin McDermod."

Kevin McDermod.

She said, through whitening lips, "The usual champagne to the press, with the compliments of the house. How is Twink, Frost?"

"All right, I guess." But his eyes were anxious. "She ought to be with kids her own age, going around to coca cola parties and hot dog junkets. Do you think if I moved to a little town it would be better? I want to keep her safe."

Safe, Velvet thought wryly.

"Of course you do, Frost. If you decide to try opening a restaurant of your own in a little town, I could help you with the capital."

She hardly heard his thanks. Her heart was crying aloud. What makes you think a little town would keep your daughter safe? I was raised in a little town. And I wasn't safe. I had to run away. I've been running for seven years. I thought I was safe, at last, here in Reno, where everybody is too busy shuffling off their pasts to be bothered about anybody else's past. I don't expect to be happy. I just want to be safe. But Kevin McDermod is coming again tonight.

She said, "Don't forget, Frost, champagne for the gentlemen of the press." Then she moved off, her lips white under their crimson lipstick.

She heard him say, "You're a real lady, Miss Velvet."

"A lost lady, Frost," she murmured, but he did not hear.

VELVET, she called herself, and it suited her down to the ground, from the top of her black hair to the soles of her slim satin slippers. In winter, she always wore black velvet gowns. Sometimes they were strapless and daring, sometimes they were like medieval robes, high to the throat, with long tight sleeves ending in points that almost covered her hands. Summers, she wore white —starched white organdy nylon net. But even with these gowns she always wore red velvet gloves. Sometimes the gloves came above her elbows, almost to her shoulders, and sometimes they were shorties, ending at the wrist and circled by flashing diamond bracelets. But always, she wore red velvet gloves and always her lipstick matched her gloves.

Her eyes were unusual, deep and mysterious. Pansy-velvet eyes, one columnist had called them. Carr Ryding had written in his column: "Velvet's eyes remind you of the purple twilight that falls on the purple sage on the purpling hills of our majestic west."

One of Carr Ryding's acid rival columnists had quipped, "Ryding's sophomoric outburst of purple prose at least leaves us in no doubt that the fabulous Velvet's eyes are purple."

People said that Carr Ryding was in love with Velvet.

So her eyes were purple. Her skin was

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thick and creamy, like a gardenia petal. Her voice was soft and warm, like velvet. Her red mouth was like velvet, too. Very few people noticed that there was an odd hurt look about that mouth, as if it had become accustomed to biting back pain. She was hostess at Monte Brannon's place, Reno's most famous gambling club. Every night, from eleven to midnight, she ran the roulette wheel.

She had a two-inch streak of white running through her jet-black hair.

People said it had turned white over night, through some tragedy, or they said she bleached it with ammonia to make herself look more spectacular.

The women said that she was thirty and the white feather made her look younger. The men said that she couldn't be more then twenty and the white plume made her look older.

The women said she was too theatrical for words, but my dear, do you think I could wear a gown like that? The men said she was hauntingly beautiful.

They said she was on the prowl for a millionaire husband and where could she meet as many millionaires as she could at Monte's? Or they said she was Monte Brannon's girl, or they said she was running away from the police.

They said she had killed a man and had stood trial for murder and had been acquitted.

About half of everything they said was true.

Velvet knew the things they said. But as long as they only guessed and their guesses were half-wrong, she could stand it. But if the old story were raked up again, there was always the chance that the whole truth might come out. She had offered up herself to keep the truth from coming out. At seventeen she had become a notorious person, about whom whispers circulated, at whom fingers were pointed, to keep the truth from coming out. She had made a mistake, seven years ago, and she had paid for it in loneliness and in bitterness, in passionate repentance and with a white feather in her jet-black hair. She had not gone through seven years of torment to have Kevin McDermod guess the truth now. Kevin, who every night sat at the press table at Monte's and watched Velvet through sleepy, sardonic blue eyes.

She was afraid of Kevin.

Kevin McDermod had guessed who she was. He would not publish it unless he were sure, but if he got his proof he would not stop for anything. Every man had his price, they said, except Kevin McDermod. Kevin was not for sale.

And so Velvet was afraid.

THAT NIGHT she stood at the door of Monte's Monte Carlo and greeted the guests. She wore the simplest white gown she owned and she wore her short gloves of scarlet velvet.

She said, "Hello, Senator. Hello, Mrs. Rolland, Mr. Rolland. Hello Mrs. Fairley. Hello, hello, hello." She sounded as if she were calling the roll of the social register and the society page and the gossip columns.

She said, "Hello, Kevin."

He said, "Hello, Elly."

The scarlet smile did not waver, the purple eyes did not widen.

"This is about the third evening you have called me Elly, Kevin. I don't mind, of course, but I can't help being curious. Is it a fixation or something?"

One of the other reporters cut in.

"If you can get an answer to that question, Velvet, let me in on the know, will you? I've known Kevin for a matter of years now, and every so often he calls some girl Elly. Once it was a waitress in Kansas City and once it was a hat check girl in New York and once it was a kindergarten teacher in a little tank town in west Texas, You know what I think? I think he was in love with a girl named

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Elly, once. Isn't that right, Kevin?"

"Right," he said. "Once, a long time ago, I was in love with a girl named Elly."

He smiled and moved on. She watched him go. He was tall and he slumped a little, as if he were too lazy or too indifferent to stand up straight. His evening clothes were pre-war vintage, his hair was rumpled. She could never tell why it was that in a room full of handsomer men, people always turned to look at him. But they did. And if they did not know who he was, they asked.

Velvet smiled after him as she had not smiled for days. Relief in her was like a song. She had been imagining things. Kevin had not found out who she was. It was not that at all. It was only that once, a long time ago, he had been in love with a girl named Elly. Some other girl named Elly. Because, she had never laid eyes on Kevin McDermod until he had come to Monte's.

After supper, before it was time for her to take her turn at the roulette wheel, Kevin asked her to go out on the terrace for a breath of air. She went with him. Relief made her careless. She was so relieved she could have kissed Kevin. Because once he had been in love with a girl named Elly.

She was a fool. She teased him about his Elly.

"She must have been quite a gal, your Elly."

"She was," Kevin said. "I only saw her once and I remembered her all through a few centuries of hell known as World War II. I've been looking for her ever since I got back home."

"I hope you find her," Velvet said.

"Thanks. I will."

She was a fool. She felt light-hearted, light-headed.

"What did she look like?"

"Scared. You see she was on trial for killing a man."

Somewhere, thunder crashed.

"I think I'd better go in now," Velvet said.

He did not seem to hear her.

"I figure she didn't do it. Turned out I was wrong, because afterward I heard she admitted it."

"I really must go in now," Velvet said.

He did not hear her.

"I was in the Air Corps, stationed at a camp not far from this little town called Pine Hills, in Virginia. I knew the kid's brother-in-law—he was at the same camp. So I went in to see what she was like, this seventeen-year-old girl who was accused of shooting a man. I knew some of the boys on the press and they let me tag along with them, even though I was not officially a newspaper man while I was in uniform. That's how I happened to see Elly."

"I really must—"

"I was all decked out in my shining armor. I'd lain awake all night figuring out a mighty pretty speech to say to her. But when I got close enough to speak to her, all I could think of to say was, 'Keep your chin up, Elly'."

The thunder rolled and crashed and swelled in the distance and came rolling in nearer and nearer until it crashed in Velvet's heart. She remembered now.

IT HAD STARTED backed in a little town called Pine Hills, Virginia. Ellen Holmes was seventeen, living at home with her half-sister and with old Sarah, probably the last one of the story-book family retainers still in existence. Sarah looked after the orphaned Holmes girls. Blonde Marilyn was seraphic but Elly was the wild one, the one who was always getting into scrapes, who had been expelled from finishing school. Marilyn had been furious about that, but she had stood up for her in public, the way she always did, and Elly had been grateful

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and contrite and humble, the way she always was.

Anyway, being expelled from school gave her a chance to be at Marilyn's wedding to John Temple. Elly adored John as ardently as she worshipped Marilyn. It was like a fairy tale come true, where the handsome prince got the beautiful princess. She was glad to see Marilyn marry some one as wonderful as John. Now Marilyn would settle down and stop playing fast and loose with all her turbulent, tormented suitors. Ever since Elly could remember, Marilyn had been blowing hot and cold over some man.

Marilyn was always talking about how she had to take care of Elly, but sometimes it seemed to Elly that she was the one who took care of Marilyn. She was the one who had to give his ring back to Si Walker and she was the one who had told Terry Flack that Marilyn had changed her mind about eloping with him, and she was the one who had to tell Morris Blane that Marilyn never wanted to see him again. She was the one who had indignantly denied it when Si and Terry and Morris had said bitter, untrue things about how Marilyn had led them on.

So Elly was very glad, when Marilyn married John Temple, who was all that any girl, even a girl as beautiful as Marilyn, could possibly want.

He was stationed at an Army camp nearby. Marilyn could have lived nearer the camp, with John, but she said it was silly to live in one cramped room when she could stay home and let John come in on week-ends. Elly understood how Marilyn felt, but she understood how John felt, too. She tried to talk to Marilyn about it, but Marilyn told her sharply that it was her fault, anyway, that she had to stay home and look after her, because she didn't trust her.

That was the situation on that never to be forgotten week-end, when the bottom dropped out of the world. John was due to come home on a pass. As usual, he wouldn't get in until very late Friday night or early Saturday morning. Elly went to bed and left Marilyn waiting up for John.

At three o'clock in the morning she was awakened by the sound of a shot. She jumped up and put on her robe and started running downstairs. She wondered why old Sarah, who slept way at the back of the house, but who was a notoriously light sleeper, didn't come running, too.

She raced down to the living room, wondering.

Marilyn was standing in the middle of the floor with a gun in her hand and a man Elly had never seen was lying on the floor.

AFTERWARD, it struck Elly as very strange that she knew immediately that the man was dead and that Marilyn had shot him; that she knew, in that one horrified moment, that Marilyn had at last played fast and loose with the wrong man.

"Have you called a doctor?" she said. "Maybe—maybe he's not dead."

But she knew he was dead.

"He's dead," Marilyn said.

"But—"

"I held my compact mirror to his lips, the way they taught us in First Aid class. He's dead, I tell you."

Elly shivered.

"Who is he?" she whispered.

And all the time, a horrible little voice inside her kept saying, "You've known, for years, that some day something terrible was going to happen with Marilyn and some man."

His name, Marilyn told her, shaking like a leaf but lucid, was Bart Haines. She had been seeing him for the past few weeks, she hadn't meant any harm, it was only because she was lonely. Then

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she had told him it had to stop, all of it. She had told him that her husband was coming home this week-end. But Bart had come to the house tonight, had forced his way in, had pleaded with her and then threatened her and had finally drawn a gun. He hadn't believed he was serious, she had tried to take the gun away from him. In the struggle, it had gone off and Bart had been shot.

"It might have been me," Marilyn said and for the first time she began to sob hysterically. "I might have been killed."

"Bart was killed," Elly said. Her voice sounded harsh. In that moment of terrible clarity, she did not feel sorry for Marilyn at all. She only felt a great and terrifying sickness and disgust.

"Elly," Marilyn said, "you've got to say you did it."

Elly stared at her. She felt as if she had suddenly gone crazy.

"It was self defense," Marilyn said, through shattering lips. "They won't do anything to you."

"Then they wouldn't do anything to you, either," Elly retorted.

"That's not the point," Marilyn said, almost impatiently, as if she were surprised at Elly's arguing at all. "It's John —don't you see? What am I going to tell him?"

"What did you figure on telling him, when you went out with Bart? Didn't it, ever, occur to you that you might get caught?"

"Don't stand there arguing," Marilyn said, as if this were only one of their familiar sisterly quarrels, as if she had forgotten the dead man on the floor. "Of course you've got to say you did it, you've got nothing to lose." And then she added, almost triumphantly, "Isn't it a good thing I happened to be wearing evening gloves?"

Elly stared at her in fascinated horror.

"Gloves?" she echoed. "Wearing gloves, waiting for your husband to come home?"

"Well, I went out with Bart, don't you see? Earlier. For just a little while. To—to placate him. Then he brought me home."

"I thought you said he came here and forced his way in."

"Will you stop picking me up on every little thing?" Marilyn screamed. "We haven't any time."

"No," Elly said. It struck her with renewed horror that they should be talking like this while a man lay dead. "You'd better call the police."

"You call them, Elly. Please."

"All right. But I won't say I did it."

"You've got to. Can't you see, it doesn't matter about you? But I'm *married*."

"I've never forgotten that," Elly said stonily. "But apparently you've never remembered it."

"Oh, stop it. We haven't time. If you won't think of me, your own sister, think of John. You're crazy about John. Or did you think I didn't know that? Mooning over him, all the time. It's all your fault, really, this whole mess. How do you think I've felt, knowing my own sister was in love with my husband."

Elly wet her dry lips. "Stop it, Marilyn. You know you're not talking sense. You know it wasn't like that."

"Oh, wasn't it?" Marilyn screamed. "Well, I'll have you know that John knew it, too. Why else do you think he's stayed away from home week-ends? Because he was embarrassed, that's why, at the holy show you always make of yourself about him. If it hadn't been for you, he'd have been home oftener and I wouldn't have got so lonely and bored and I'd never even have gone out with Bart. It's all your fault, your fault."

Marilyn's expert slashing blade took the innocent hero-worship Elly had for John and turned it into something shameful. In an agony of humiliation she wished that she were the one who lay on the floor dead.

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"You owe something to John for what you've done to him," Marilyn said. "You've got to say you were the one, because you were really the cause of it all."

"No," Elly whispered.

IF SHE had had more time, she might have gone on saying no. But suddenly Marilyn dropped the gun on the floor and ran out. Then John came in, Marilyn clinging to his arm, sobbing.

"John, John! Thank God you've come. Elly shot that man, John. But it was self-defense. He threatened her."

Elly hardly heard her. She was staring at John's face. Shock slowly gave place to horror and horror to loathing. He raised his hand as if to strike her.

Marilyn caught his arm. "She's so young. She didn't know what she was doing."

The loathing was gone and slowly, pity was taking its place, pity so mixed with disgust and contempt that she could not tell where one emotion left off and the other began.

"So young," John repeated. "So damnably young."

"I—" Elly began, then stopped.

"Go upstairs," he said harshly "and put on some clothes. Marilyn can tell me the story while you are dressing. And then I'll call the police. You must tell them the exact truth about everything, except that one thing—at least we do not have to let them know that you were entertaining a man at three o'clock in the morning, dressed like that!"

"I—" began Elly again.

"I will help you all I can, but for God's sake get out of my sight before I change my mind!"

If he could look at her like this, how would he look at Marilyn? If thinking this thing about her could make him look white as death and sickened and shattered, what would it do to him to find out that it was his wife of six months who had done this?

"Yes, John," Elly said, and went upstairs.

Old Sarah was waiting for her in her room.

"Miss Elly, baby, you aren't going to let them do this to you, are you?"

Elly stared at her. "What do you know, Sarah?"

"I was there," Sarah said. "All the time. I saw Miss Elly shoot him. I was in the hall in the dark when you ran by me. Miss Elly, baby, you can't let her do this to you."

"She has done it," Elly said, and her voice was cold and dead.

While she dressed she battled against the old woman's pleading. "Go back to bed, Sarah. You were asleep at the time, you didn't hear a thing, remember that." Somehow she got her promise.

Then she went downstairs to face the police.

During the sensational weeks that followed, the newspaper reporters were her worst ordeal. At one of the interviews a tall lean young man in the uniform of a captain in the Air Force was with the reporters. When the interview was over, he stopped at Elly's side and muttered, "Keep your chin up, Elly."

It did something that nothing else had done until then. It released the flood tide of tears inside her. That night, for the first and only time, she wept.

She was indicted for second-degree murder, was tried and acquitted.

But there was another trial, a trial by fire. She was on trial in the newspapers and in the public mind. She was on trial for being the kind of girl who entertained men alone at three o'clock in the morning, the kind of girl who led men on, made them so wild that they threatened her with guns.

On those counts Elly Holmes was tried. And the verdict was guilty.

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After the trial, she ran away. She did a lot of different things in a lot of different places. After a long time running, she ended up in Reno, Nevada, at Monte's place. She'd been here for more than a year and she'd thought she was safe. She had been safe, until Kevin McDermod came along. Kevin McDermod, who through seven years of war and post-war, had remembered saying to a frightened girl, "Keep your chin up, Elly."

VELVET smiled at Kevin McDermod now.

"What a charming, romantic story," she said lightly. "And are you still in love with your Elly?"

"No," he said.

"How sad," Velvet said.

"You're a lot like her, you know," he said and Velvet stood so still she seemed not even to breathe.

"Her hair was a lot like yours," he said musingly. "Only of course she didn't have that spectacular streak of white. After all, she was only about seventeen."

She had it before she was eighteen, Velvet thought bitterly.

"Her eyes were the same color as yours," he went on. "But of course they weren't like yours, any other way. Your eyes are guarded. Elly hadn't learned, then, to put a guard on her eyes."

"But your mouth is entirely different," Kevin said. "That was the first thing I noticed about her—her mouth. It was damn funny, all those things they said about her. Yet her mouth looked as if she had never even been kissed,"

His voice changed subtly, so did his eyes. His eyes were no longer sleepy, they were bright and mocking.

"Now your mouth, Velvet. It beckons, it invites, it encourages. If your eyes didn't say, 'Hands Off', so plainly, a man could get all sorts of ideas from your mouth."

"Really?" she said, and turned to go.

But his hands were hard on her shoulders, turning her back.

"Close your eyes," he said softly, "so I cannot see that 'Hands Off' sign."

She was too proud to struggle against his strength. She steeled herself against the kiss she knew was coming, the kiss she expected to be ruthless and insulting, the kiss she intended to endure and forget.

He did not kiss her like that at all. His mouth was seeking, but it was inexpressably tender, it warmed but it did not burn. Everything brightened and stirred, ice melted and something she had thought was dead forever came alive again. It was her heart that came alive again.

As soon as she made a move to draw away, he released her.

"I've been waiting for seven years for that kiss, Elly Holmes," he said.

"I am not Elly Holmes."

She left him standing there and went back into the gambling room. She did not know whether Kevin believed her or not. She did not know whether Kevin was still convinced that she was Elly Holmes. She only knew that she loved him.

She did not try to deny the shattering thing that had happened to her. Love was a thing that happened, a thing one could not help. But it was something that should never have happened to a girl like her.

It had happened now. She wanted to run away and she knew she could not. Because if Kevin McDermod were not really quite sure that she was Elly Holmes, then running away would make him sure. And then he would never let up. That was undoubtedly why he had kissed her, to trick her into doing something desperate, like running, that would give her away. His kiss was a shot in the dark, a colossal bluff, a kiss to smoke her out. A kiss he had meant only as a trick had made her heart come alive.

She moved on toward the gambling

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room and Carr Ryding stopped her.

"Velvet, what's wrong, You're so white."

She thought, Why couldn't it have been Carr who found out I was Elly Holmes? I could bargain with him. I have something he wants.

"Carr, you're a newspaper man," she said. "If you raked up an old scandal that would hurt everybody and help nobody, what would you do?"

"It's seldom true that newspaper stories hurt everybody and help nobody. It's always better to have the truth come out."

In that moment she hated all newspaper men.

"Carr, why do you keep hanging around here?"

"That is the first deliberately cruel thing I have ever heard you say, Velvet," he said evenly.

She shrugged and moved on. Monte made his way over to her. He smiled at her.

"For heaven's sake, Velvet! You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"So I have," she answered. "A ghost from my past."

"Your past? What's that? In Reno, a person has no past."

"And no future," she said.

"Mrs. Monte Brannon would have a future."

She laughed. "Has everybody gone crazy tonight? The one thing I have heard oftenest in Reno is that Monte Brannon never proposed marriage to a woman in his life. Or am I assuming too much in thinking that was a proposal."

"It was a proposal," he said evenly.

She thought suddenly, Nobody would dare cross Monte Brannon's wife. Not even Kevin would dare.

Immediately, she was ashamed.

"You deserve better than I could give

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you, Monte," she said gently, and went on.

ALL the gambling games were crowded. The usual crowd was playing, the regulars. She didn't see any new faces. A person had to have a card to gamble at Monte's. He gave them only to people he knew could afford to lose. They were little square cards engraved with sayings: "If you can't afford to lose, you can't afford to gamble." "The percentage is always with the house." "My roulette wheel is honest, but only a sucker ever plays roulette."

They were famous, those little cards of Monte's. Every one bore the name of the player and Monte's personal signature. It was said throughout Nevada that if you had one of Monte's cards it was all the security you needed at a bank.

It was getting on toward eleven and Velvet moved over to the roulette wheel. Jake, the croupier, looked up and smiled at her. He was her friend, maybe her best friend. Maybe, thought Velvet bleakly, her only friend. Another man might have resented Monte bringing in a woman croupier for an hour every night and dramatizing the fact. But not Jake. He didn't have to be angry. He was the most expert and astute gambler in Nevada, next to Monte Brannon. And he had taught Velvet all there was to know about handling a roulette wheel.

He had even, one memorable afternoon, told her the story of the second roulette wheel at Monte's, the one that stood over in a far corner and was never used. The story was that once Monte had dropped a fortune on that wheel and then had discovered it was crooked. He had shot the man who ran it, so rumor said.

Jake had showed the fascinated Velvet how to operate the wheel to make a player win or lose, at the will of the house.

Then he had laughed and said, "Monte would kill me if he knew I'd showed you that; he wouldn't trust his own mother to run a game in his place if she knew what I just showed you."

"He trusts you," Velvet had said.

"Monte's one of the two honest gamblers in Nevada. The other one is me."

"You can make it three now, Jake," she had laughed.

Jake hadn't laughed.

"You aren't a gambler, Velvet. What's with you, anyway? How come you're here? Monte runs an honest gambling joint, yes, but it's a joint, just the same. It's no place for a lady."

"Who's a lady?" she'd answered lightly.

He hadn't smiled. "You're as out of place in this joint as a flower in the gutter. Why don't you cut and run?"

"I've been running for seven years. You get tired of running, after a while, Jake. You want to be safe, even if a gutter is the only safe place there is."

But Kevin McDermod had come to Monte's and she was no longer safe.

She stood by Jake now and watched him work the wheel for ten more minutes, and then she took over. When she went to work, she resolutely put aside her own thoughts and concentrated on the job. You couldn't let your mind wander when you were running a roulette wheel. And then Kevin came and stood on the fringes of the crowd, watching.

Velvet's voice faltered, her eyes blurred. Once she called a wrong number and felt her cheeks go hot and her hands go cold. Monte came over to her.

"You sick or something?" he muttered under his breath. "Want Jake to take your turn?"

She started to say yes and then looked up and saw Kevin regarding her out of sardonic blue eyes.

"No, thanks, Monte," she said quickly. "I'm all right."

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Then she attacked.

"Would you like to play, Mr. McDermod?" she asked smoothly.

He grinned. "You're forgetting, Velvet. I'm a newspaper man. Gentlemen of the press don't rate one of Monte's gilt-edged cards of admission."

"I always wondered," she said smoothly, "who started that 'gentlemen' gag."

A little laugh ran through the crowd.

Velvet went on, "Monte would give you an identification card, wouldn't you, Monte?"

Monte laughed. He liked Kevin. Everybody liked Kevin, thought Velvet furiously.

"Sure, Kevin," Monte said. "Want a card? It's yours."

"No, thanks." He grinned sideways at Monte, but he kept on looking at Velvet.

"You're not a gambler, are you, Mr. McDermod?" she taunted softly. "You only bet on a sure thing."

"Oh, I gamble on occasion, when the stakes are right."

HER FACE was innocent. "We can make the stakes high enough to suit you, I'm sure, Mr. McDermod."

The crowd was enjoying the little by-play. Some one called, "What's the matter, Kevin? Scared?"

"Scared to death," he said dolefully.

"Of me?" Velvet taunted softly. "I'd rather like to gamble with you, Mr. McDermod. I think I'd win."

"Okay, Monte." He shrugged. "I'll take that card."

Monte took a card out of his pocket, filled it in and handed it over.

"Chips, Mr. McDermod?" Velvet said.

"One," he said cheerfully. "One blue." He fished out a crumpled ten dollar bill. Grinning, Monte took it from him, went to the window and came back and solemnly handed him one blue chip."

Kevin looked at Velvet. "How about picking my lucky number, Velvet?"

She said, clearly, "I'm against you, Mr. McDermod, remember?"

He shrugged, leaned over and dropped the chip.

Velvet sang out, "Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen."

They only laughed and moved closer to watch. Nobody placed a bet. This, the crowd seemed to sense, was between Velvet and Kevin.

Let him lose, prayed Velvet, and spun the wheel. Oh, please let him lose.

He won.

Silently, she pushed his winnings toward him. Their eyes met and locked for the space of a breath. Then he turned away.

"All right if I quit while I'm winning, Monte?"

"Sure." Monte laughed. "I wouldn't want you to break the bank, Kevin."

"All right with you, Velvet?"

"Quite all right." In spite of her will, her voice shook a little. "I'd advise you to quit, Mr. McDermod. Next time you might not win."

"I'll argue that point with you some time. A newspaper man usually wins."

"Open warfare, openly declared," she said sweetly, and her red mouth smiled. Her eyes were purple pools of darkness.

When she got home that night, he was waiting for her, leaning indolently against her locked door.

"I never, in all my born days," she said lightly, "saw a man with such a lazy backbone. Don't you ever stand up straight, Kevin?"

"Upon occasion, when it's necessary."

"Why did you come here?" she asked.

"To tell you something." He waited until she had opened the door and he followed her in. Then he spoke.

"I believe that you are Elly Holmes and I believe that Elly Holmes did not shoot Bart Haines."

It was open warfare, openly declared. Yes, Kevin would do that.

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She said warily, "I suppose that you have grounds for both of those ridiculous beliefs?"

"I think so."

"What grounds," she said, and held her breath.

His answer was a question, but the question was an answer, just the same.

"Why do you always wear gloves?"

One of the points that had been brought out at the trial was that Bart Haines' fingerprints were on the gun. It had been the most telling point for Elly's plea of self-defense. Bart Haines' fingerprints on the gun. And no other prints. Because the accused had been wearing evening gloves.

But nobody had asked Elly Holmes, that night, or after, where her gloves were. John Temple had not asked, nor had the police. Nor, later, had her lawyer, Mr. Fisher. But Kevin was asking her. Where had Kevin picked up that point?

"Aren't we getting off the subject?" Velvet asked.

"Are we?"

"If I were your Elly Holmes, which I am not, then I would ask you why you are raking up an old, old story now. If I were your Elly Holmes I would remind you that seven long years have gone by."

"Because seven years have gone by," he said. "And Elly Holmes does not belong in a gambling house, getting harder and more bitter and more lost. Because in another seven years, in another year perhaps, it will be too late for Elly Holmes. I do not go in for that kind of useless self-sacrifice." His voice was angry. "I do not believe in noble lies. They never do anyone any good. Only the truth ever does anyone any good."

"Truth for truth's sake? I don't believe you."

His face hardened. "Very well, if you do not care for that explanation, let's say that I do not like what seven years have done to a small scared girl with pleading purple eyes. And I will not be responsible for seven more years of the same."

"Do you expect me to swallow that? You want a story, that's all, and you do not care a fig for Elly Holmes. If you drag it all up again, everything, all the suffering, will have been of no use, no use at all! Don't you see? It will all be wasted.

"It's already been wasted. All of it, the whole seven years, has been a criminal, wicked waste. That is why I intend to do something about it. Before it is too late."

"It is already too late."

HE SAID, gently, "Marilyn wasn't worth it, Elly."

She almost went to pieces, then. But she clenched her hands and held on.

"If—mind you, I say if, if I were to admit I was Elly Holmes, just so you will have the satisfaction of knowing you are right, would you forget the whole thing?"

"No."

"What would you do, then?"

"I'd tell the world."

"I'll bargain with you," she said bitterly. "What is it you want?"

"You haven't anything I want. You're talking to the wrong man, Velvet. What would you buy me off with? You haven't any money. With kisses, then? Your kiss was cold. You haven't anything I want, Velvet."

He hadn't liked kissing her. It was silly, when there was so much at stake, to be stabbed by the fact that he hadn't liked kissing her.

"You are stupid," she flung at him. "Why don't you let your Elly Holmes alone? She's satisfied."

"What if you fall in love, Elly?"

"I'll never fall in love!"

"Now you are the one who is being

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stupid, Elly." He put his hands on her shoulders and such a trembling began inside her that she thought she would fall, such a longing began inside her that she thought she would die of it. Kevin said softly, "You have no heart for it. You were meant to love some man and have some man love you. It is your destiny. And you say you will never fall in love! Don't shake so, I didn't say I was the man who was meant to love you. I am only the man who will set you free, so that you can take from life what you want."

She flung him off as if the touch of his hands was something she could not bear.

"You are more than stupid, you are blind, blind! Very well, I will tell you the truth. I have got what I want. Everything I have been working toward for seven years, everything I have wanted all my life, I got tonight. Monte Brannon asked me to marry him."

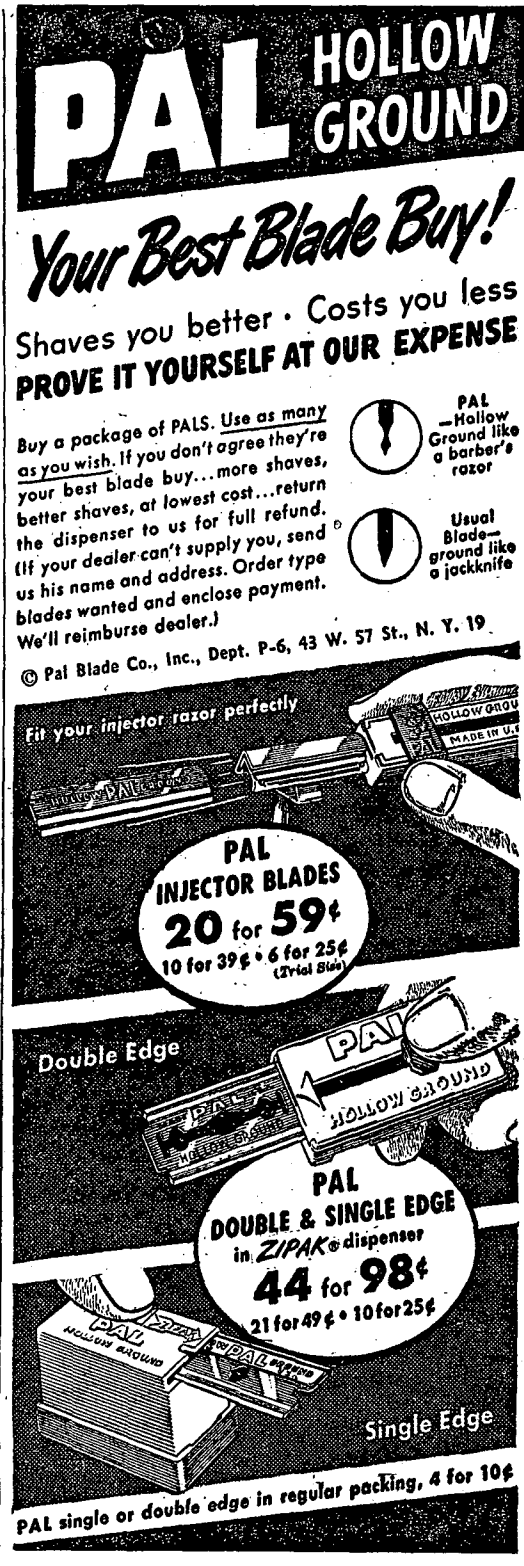
"Monte Brannon!" His face was stark. "Monte Brannon? Everything you've wanted all your life?"

"He's rich," Velvet said. "He's exciting. I've had to play my cards well to get him, I can tell you that. You don't know how I've had to work and scheme to get him. I won't let you spoil everything for me now."

She had never seen such contempt on a man's face. Not even John Temple, on that fateful night, had looked at her with such blazing contempt as was on Kevin's face now.

"I was wrong," he said, "and you were right. It is already too late. You are already a lost lady. Or maybe you always were. Maybe I saw something in Elly Holmes' face, seven years ago, that wasn't there. Maybe even then it wasn't there. Maybe you should have been christened Velvet."

His hands were on her again and they were not gentle now. His mouth was savage, punishing. This was the kiss she had expected from him earlier, on the porch,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and had not gotten. This was an insulting kiss, a kiss to be endured and forgotten. Except that now she would never be able to forget.

He pushed her away at last.

"Marry Monte Brannon," he said. "I won't interfere. I'll dance at your wedding. If you marry Monte Brannon, I'll forget there ever was a girl named Elly Holmes." He ripped out an oath. "I'll do better than that. If you marry anybody, I'll help you bury the memory of Elly Holmes."

He went out and the loneliness closed in on her. There had never been loneliness like this in all the world before.

The next night she got to the club early, to see Monte. She went to his office and said it quickly:

"Monte, did you mean it last night when you asked me to marry you? Because if you did mean it, I will."

"Mean it?" he shouted. "Of course I meant it!"

He took her in his arms. She closed her eyes. She forced herself not to move away. She made herself stay still and compliant to receive his kiss.

He let her go with an oath.

"I ought to kill you for that, Velvet!"

"But, Monte," she whispered.

"Did you think that was all I wanted? You were hating it, weren't you? Did you think I would want a wife who hated to have me touch her? The hell with it. The offer is withdrawn."

She said, white-faced and honest. "I'm sorry, Monte. I didn't know. Believe me, I didn't know."

"Forget it."

"Monte, I'm so sorry."

"I said forget it." He broke off. "What the hell do you want, Ryding?"

"I'm so sorry," Carr Ryding said. "I've been standing here quite a while, which I regret, believe me. I came in early to see you because I was worried about Velvet last night."

Velvet said, "Well if you've been there quite a while, you heard Monte refuse my hand in marriage." She stood there, slim and white-faced, with burning purple eyes. "I'm in the market for a husband, Carr. Will you marry me? Or have you changed your mind about wanting me, too?"

"Ah, Velvet, Velvet," Carr said. "I love you. You know that. But I won't marry you. If I were less hungry, I might be satisfied with crumbs. But to a starving man, crumbs are worse than no bread at all. Your trouble my dear, is that a man cannot love you just a little."

So Carr did not want her, either. Velvet stood straight as a sword and smiled.

"Good-by, Carr."

SHE turned, her head high. She had proposed to two men and two men had rejected her. But her black head was high. She turned—and walked into Kevin.

"Hello, hello," he said. "Quite a gathering. I came to congratulate Monte."

"You can save yourself the trouble," Velvet said. "Monte doesn't want to marry me. Neither does Carr."

"Do tell. Well, my proposition still stands."

"You may withdraw it. I've exhausted my prospects."

"Is this a private fight?" Monte asked. "Or can anybody get in on it? What proposition, Kevin?"

"Velvet and I made a bargain. If she married anybody, I was to drop a certain project I have in mind. Anybody, I said, Velvet. How about me? Would you care to marry me?"

"Have your fun," she said.

He stood leaning against the door jamb, eyes half closed, mouth cynical. "It's a bona fide offer. You have two witnesses. What do you say?"

If looks could have killed, he would have dropped dead at her feet.

"I hate you," she said tonelessly.

"Well, I know of politer ways to reject

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a suitor. But I will say this for you, you're honest. Good-by, all. I'll see you in a week or so."

"Going out of town?" Monte asked.

"Why, yes," Kevin said. "To a little town called Pine Hills, Virginia." He lifted his hand in a mocking salute and went out.

He was going to Pine Hills, Virginia—to get the lowdown on a girl named Elly Holmes.

Four days went by. Every night Monte asked softly, "Heard from Kevin?" and every night Velvet said, "No."

But on the fifth night, Kevin came. That was the night Monte was out of town. What happened could never have happened if Monte had not been out of town.

Kevin said, "Hello, Velvet. I'm back."

"So I see." And to prove she was not afraid, she asked, "Well, did you get your story on Elly Holmes."

"Yes."

The palms of her scarlet velvet gloves were suddenly as wet as if she had plunged her hands into icy water.

"Half the story is in my pocket," Kevin said, "and the other half is in my hotel room."

"Really?"

"Really."

She made a move to go past him.

"Don't you want to hear the story, Velvet?"

"No."

"Come out on the terrace with me."

On the terrace he had kissed her, that first time, that tender time, and had made her heart come alive again. And ever since her heart had been hurting, aching.

"No."

"Then hear it here." His eyes were suddenly dark. "It won't take long. I have a signed paper in my pocket. This is what it says. Quote. *Miss Elly didn't do it. It was wrong to say she did. Miss Marilyn killed him. I saw her shoot him. Then Miss Elly came in and Miss Marilyn tried to make her say she did it, but Miss Elly wouldn't say it. Miss Marilyn kept at her and at her, but Miss Elly wouldn't say it. Then Mr. John came in and Miss Elly said she did it. Unquote.*"

Sarah. Old, faithful Sarah. Telling the truth, at long last.

"Sarah," Velvet said bitterly.

"Yes. Sarah."

"What did you do to her to make her tell?"

"I told her that you were working in a gambling salon."

"You were cruel to tell her that," Velvet said furiously.

"I don't think so. For the first time in seven years, Sarah is content. It has been a heavy burden for her to carry."

"What are you going to do with that paper?"

"First of all, I shall show it to John Temple."

Velvet's face went so white the scarlet lipstick stood out garishly. Without a word she turned her back and walked away.

"You're five minutes late," said Jake, and turned the wheel over to her.

"Place your bets," she began mechanically, and then looked up and saw what Kevin had followed her. And suddenly she thought of what she could do.

"We have a returned traveler with us tonight," Velvet said. "Perhaps you remember when Kevin was here last. He gambled the whole of ten dollars and he won."

A little laugh stirred the crowd.

"HE THINKS he can always win," Velvet said merrily. "But, oh, how wrong he is. Ladies and gentlemen, this wheel is closed to everybody but Kevin McDermod. He and I have a score to settle. Well, Kevin, what do you say?"

"You can't win, Velvet."

"I dare you," she laughed.

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"It won't prove anything. Even if I play and you win, it will only be money. I will not gamble for anything but money, Velvet."

"And what else would you gamble for, Kevin?" Her merry laugh rang out. Only her purple eyes were dark and stormy. "I am not asking you to wager anything but money, Kevin."

"Very well. As long as that's understood." He turned his pockets inside out, emptied their contents on the table. "My next month's room and board," he mocked. "Let's go, Velvet."

She made a movement and the wheel did not spin. She tried again. She gave a rueful little laugh. "It's jammed."

His eyes were puzzled, watchful. "Then we'll postpone our little contest."

"Not at all. There's another roulette wheel over at the other end of the room—a spare. We'll have our battle over there."

His eyes were narrow and hot and blue. Then he shrugged. "Why not?"

For ten minutes Kevin won. His winnings piled up in front of him. The players at the other games stopped and came over to watch. Kevin continued to win. In another ten minutes not another person in the room was gambling. They were banked like a solid wall, not speaking, not seeming to breathe, watching Kevin McDermod on his way to breaking the bank at Monte's.

Jake came in and pushed his way through the crowd to Velvet's side.

"Where did you come from?" she asked. "You're supposed to be off duty."

"One of the boys came and got me. Have you gone crazy, Velvet?"

"Get away from me," she said under her breath. Her voice rang out. "Place your bet, Kevin."

"Shall I, Jake?" he asked coolly. "Is Monte's good for this if I go on winning. This is my lucky night. I'd hate to put Monte's out of business."

"Tell him, Jake," Velvet said. "Tell him Monte's isn't scared by a swellheaded newspaper guy who thinks his winning streak will last forever."

Jake took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. Velvet smiled at him.

"How about it, Jake?" asked Kevin. "Do you want to close the wheel?"

"No," he said hoarsely.

"Place your bet, Kevin," Velvet sang out.

He looked down at the pile in front of him.

"That's a lot of money there, Velvet. There's more money there than I could expect to earn the rest of my life."

"Really? You've been lucky."

"And it won't buy one little bit of paper I have in my pocket," Kevin said softly. "Isn't that funny, Velvet? There's not enough money in Nevada to buy that little piece of paper in my pocket."

"Place your bet, Kevin."

"I don't know," he drawled. "Maybe I'd be smart to quit now."

Velvet's face was pale with excitement. There was no color at all in her face. Even her lips, under their scarlet lipstick, were white.

"You can't quit now." She stripped off the scarlet velvet gloves and tossed them aside. They lay on the table like a blood-red challenge. "Shall we continue the fight without gloves, Kevin?"

He looked at her slim, white, ungloved hands.

"A battle to the death, Velvet?"

"To the death. Place your bet, Kevin."

He leaned forward and pushed out all his winnings. A little breath ran through the still room. He won. "Let it ride," he said. He won again. "Let it ride," he said.

And then he lost.

"Well," he said, "that appears to be that. I'm cleaned. Thanks for the ride on the merry-go-round, Velvet."

"You're not quitting? Don't be silly,

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Kevin. Your IOU is good at Monte's. Boy! Bring Mr. McDermod a stack of chips and take his IOU."

He looked at her. His smile was brilliant and dangerous. He said, softly, "I underestimated you, Velvet."

"Place your bet, Kevin."

At twelve o'clock Kevin owed Monte's thirty-two thousand dollars. At twelve o'clock Velvet made a little gesture with her slim bare hands and stood back.

"The wheel is closed. Unless, of course, you'd like to continue with Jake."

"No, thanks," he said. "I'll take you home."

"I'd like to see you for a minute, Velvet," Jake said.

"TOMORROW, Jake. Kevin is taking me home now." She smiled around the room. "You may place your bets now, ladies and gentlemen, with Jake. At the other wheel, if you please. The other wheel has been repaired, hasn't it, Jake?"

"Yes," Jake said. "This way, ladies and gentlemen."

"Are you ready, Velvet?" Kevin asked.

"Quite ready."

She waited until they got home. Then she stood in her apartment and smiled at him. In this room he had kissed her. In this room he had said, "You haven't anything I want, Velvet." Well, now she had something he wanted.

"You can't pay thirty-two thousand dollars, can you, Kevin? You can't *raise* thirty-two thousand dollars, can you?"

"I have about as much chance of raising thirty-two thousand dollars, Velvet, as you have of suddenly turning soft as butter."

"Monte will be back tomorrow. Monte Brannon doesn't like to be taken for a ride, Kevin. No man living has ever beat Monte Brannon out of thirty-two thousand dollars and no man ever will. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I know that."

"You'll be run out of Nevada. You'll lose your job. You'll be kicked out of the newspaper business. That's only the least of the things that will happen to you. Monte will see to it, Monte's just the man who can do it."

"I expect he is," Kevin agreed.

"Give me the paper in your pocket," Velvet said, "and give me your word to forget all about Elly Holmes. And I'll square it with Monte about that thirty-two thousand dollars."

"No," he said.

She went rigid with shock.

"You can't do anything else!"

"Oh, but I can. I can say no."

"But Monte is—"

"Monte is a ruthless thug. The fact that he runs an honest game in a state where gambling is legalized, doesn't make him any less a gangster. Monte will not take a loss lying down—if he doesn't get his

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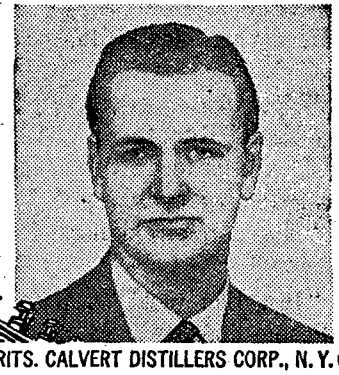

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money he'll take it out of my hide, in the age-old gangster tradition. That's what you're trying to tell me, isn't it? But I know all that, Velvet. I've been around. I've seen Monte's kind at work."

"Then you—"

"The answer is no, Velvet."

"But you can't—"

He leaned over and kissed her suddenly trembling mouth.

"We who are about to die salute you," he said. And then he left.

She went to the club early the next night. She went straight to Monte's office. She planned to be waiting for him there when he got in. But he was already there. And Kevin's IOU lay on his desk in front of him.

"It's about time you showed, Velvet," he said, and his voice was like rock. "What the hell is this?"

"Didn't Jake tell you?"

"Jake didn't show tonight. Sick, he says. He better be sick. He'll be a lot sicker when I get through with him."

"Jake had nothing to do with it. It was my fault."

"You know the rules. Nobody plays here who can't foot their bills. Since when was a newspaper guy good for thirty grand."

"He had a card."

"I gave him that card for laughs. You knew that. You'll have to do better than that, Velvet." And then he stopped her with a gesture and his face was suddenly affable and unutterably ruthless. "Come in, Kevin."

Kevin came in. He looked at Velvet and smiled.

"You wanted to see me, Monte?"

"Yeah," Monte said. He shoved the IOU a little forward on his desk. "You bring the money with you, Kevin?"

"No. I'm afraid not. I can't pay it, Monte."

"Just like that?" Monte said silkily. "People don't play in my joint and not pay, Kevin. It wouldn't be good for business."

"I can see your point. Nevertheless, Monte, I haven't a prayer of a chance to get hold of thirty two thousand dollars."

"Then I feel sorry for you," Monte said. "When I get through with you you're going to wish you'd never been born."

"You aim to do the job yourself," Kevin asked softly, "or are you sending some of your boys?"

"YOU think you're smart? You think think you can needle me into fighting you with my fists, like a gentleman, Kevin? I'm no gentleman, newsboy, I'm a gambler. After you leave here you better watch yourself. You've had your warning; now get out."

"Oh, stop it!" Velvet cried. "Stop it, stop it, stop it!" The words were a thin scream. Kevin looked at her and smiled.

"Keep out of this, Velvet," Monte said.

"I can't keep out of it. Listen to me, Monte—listen, I tell you. Kevin played last night *on the crooked wheel.*"

Monte's face turned a slow purple.

"On the crooked wheel," she repeated. "I knew about it. Jake showed it to me one day, just for a joke. It wasn't his fault—he never dreamed I'd ever use it. But I used it last night. Just with Kevin."

"Is that true, Kevin?"

"Why, yes," Kevin said. "Thank you, Velvet. Things were beginning to get a little uncomfortable."

Monte brought his clenched fists down on the table. "I ought to kill you for this, Velvet."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did."

He picked up the IOU and tore it into bits. He said, "It appears I owe you an apology, Kevin." Then he said, "You're fired, Velvet."

"Yes, of course," she said. And went out, not looking back.

Kevin caught up with her at the door. "My car's here. Get in."

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She got in. "Go ahead and gloat, Kevin. You've won."

"I never felt less like gloating in my life. I've lost more than I've won."

She began to tremble violently.

"Don't," he said. "Ah, Velvet, don't."

"You stood there and smiled, while he was threatening to have his boys beat you up. He'd have done it. You knew that."

"You can stop handing out the medals, Velvet. I knew you'd tell him."

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I've known for years the story of that crooked roulette wheel at Monte's."

"But you played on it! You signed that IOU! 'You stood there and let Monte threaten you. Kevin, what if I hadn't told him?"

"But you did tell him," he said.

He took a paper out of his pocket and laid it in her lap.

"There you are, Velvet. Tear it up, if you like. I can't fight you any more. But I can beg. I am begging now. Let the truth come out. It can't do any harm now."

"It can put Marilyn on trial," she said harshly. "It can break John's heart."

His face was suddenly horrified.

"Do you mean you don't know? In heaven's name, Velvet! I never dreamed you didn't know. Marilyn is dead."

"Dead?" she whispered. She had deliberately, for seven years, not read a Virginia paper. She had deliberately cut herself off from any news. "Dead?"

"She was killed three years ago, in an automobile accident, when she was traveling to Florida to get her second divorce."

"Divorce?"

"She left John Temple for another man while he was still overseas. That's why I kept telling you that your lie didn't do any good. That kind of lie never does any good. Sooner or later John Temple was bound to find out what she was like. Actually, I think he guessed, all along. I was in his outfit, you know. He was the one one who put me on the right track. He couldn't stop talking about the case. And one day he said, 'But when I came in that night, Elly wasn't wearing gloves.' I think when he said that he knew the truth."

His voice slowed, deepened. Then he went on, "If it's any comfort to you, after he got out of the service he tried to find you."

She began to cry then, great shuddering sobs.

"Don't," Kevin pleaded, his voice raw and aching. "Don't, Velvet. Marilyn was what she was. You couldn't make her any different, no matter what you did. She wasn't worth what you did for her."

"I didn't do it for her. Not completely. It was because of John."

KEVIN'S face went quite white.

"I wouldn't believe it," he said. "Everything pointed to it. Sarah's statement implied it. *'And then Mr. John came in and Miss Elly said she did it.'* But I wouldn't believe it. I'm a glutton for punishment. I had to hear you say it."

He started the motor of the car.

"Where are you going?" Velvet asked.

"To take you to him." His voice was tortured. "I told you I had half the story in my pocket and the other half in my hotel room. I brought John Temple back with me. I didn't have any proof that you were Elly Holmes. Sarah's statement merely said that Elly didn't kill Bart; she didn't know where Elly was. So I brought John Temple back with me, to identify you." He slammed the car into gear. "I told you I'd lost more than I'd won. I'm taking you to the man you love."

"You, too?" Her voice was lost.

He paused, the car still motionless. "What do you mean by that?"

She shook her head wearily. It didn't matter. Let him think she was in love with John. He'd proved his point, that was all

(Please turn to page 124)

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"What are you afraid of, Lisa?" Bruce asked sternly.

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♥ ♥

When Bruce fell in love with Lisa, he did not know that she was the girl who could solve the riddle of his sister's death.

Hideaway

By
CHARLES B. POSTL

HE SWUNG up the drive, a tall, broad-shouldered man dressed comfortably in tan flannels and a white silk sport shirt. Lisa Garland heard his footsteps crunch on the gravel, whirled around, and immediately remembered Niles' warning to keep out of sight. With an effort she fought back the panic that tightened her throat, clasped her hands together to stop their sudden trembling.

"Excuse me for barging in like this," the stranger apologized, when he reached Lisa's side. "I'm Bruce Heatherington. I flatter myself into believing I'm an artist, and I've just converted the old Barnes cottage down the road into a studio. The utility company promised to send a man out to turn on the electricity. But he hasn't shown up, and I was wondering if I might use your telephone to find out why." He gestured upward to the telephone wire leading in from the road to Lisa's house. "I saw that," he added pleasantly.

Lisa almost gasped in relief. Then she murmured, "Of course. Come with me. The phone is in the back hall."

After she had directed Bruce Heatherington to the telephone, Lisa walked into

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her living room. Somewhere, in the back regions of the house, Mattie, the housekeeper, was humming as she went about her work. But here, with the jalousies drawn against the blazing Florida sunlight, it was quiet and dimly cool, and Lisa unconsciously sought the shadows like a trapped butterfly hiding in the very folds of its net.

She didn't know how long she stood there gazing somberly at the pattern of the carpet beneath her feet when she became aware that she wasn't alone anymore.

Bruce Heatherington was standing quietly in the doorway, his sea-blue eyes fastened speculatively upon Lisa's slim figure. A shaft of sunlight struck him, warming the bronze of his lean-planed, square-jawed face, turning his waving blond hair into a crest of white gold.

For a moment their glances met and locked. Then Lisa felt a searing current spin through her veins, quickening her heartbeats. Startled, she fought off the bewildering emotion. "Did you get them?" she asked nervously.

He nodded. "Sure did. Many thanks. They'll take care of me tomorrow." He came slowly forward. "You know, now that we're going to be neighbors we'll have to get better acquainted. You must come over and see my studio when I get it in shape."

Lisa's lips automatically tightened at his words and she bluntly refused the cigarette he offered her from his proffered case. "I'm afraid I haven't time to do any visiting," she said distantly. "Anyway, I don't expect to be here much longer."

Bruce dropped a match into an ash tray on the table beside him. "Oh, come now. Where's that southern spirit of friendliness I've been hearing about all my life," he protested teasingly. "Surely you can spare one afternoon to come over and tell me what you think of my paintings."

He moved closer. Lisa caught the fresh, clean masculine scent of him, a blend of fragrant shaving lotion and pungent tobacco. Again she felt the disturbingly compelling power of his vivid blue eyes so close to hers. Annoyed, she moved quickly backward, stumbled over a rubber mouse Mattie's cat had dragged into the room. For a minute she swayed dizzily. Then Bruce's arms shot out, caught her safe and close against him.

Shaken, Lisa remained momentarily quiet. Then she looked up to thank him for helping her. Immediately the words froze in her throat.

HE WAS staring at her oddly, his eyes lit with a determined fire. Before she could fathom his intentions, he lowered his head and his lips brushed blindly across her cheek seeking her mouth, claiming it in a warm, insistent caress. A swimming sweetness clouded her brain, over-riding her rising outrage and anger. And gradually the warmth and demand of his possessive lips sent every drop of blood in her body pounding to meet the fire in his.

When at last he let her go, the room was spinning. She clutched unsteadily at his arm for support. As strength returned, she sprang away from him. "You—you wolf," she stormed. "What gave you the idea you had any right to—"

"Wait, please!" Soothingly he reached out, caught her shaking hands in his strong brown ones, held them tightly. "That was terribly unfair, I know," he apologized earnestly. "I beg of you to forgive me. But don't you see—" He stopped, raised her hands to his lips and kissed her finger tips gently. "Don't you see a man would have to be made of ice to resist any girl as desirable as you, once he held her in his arms." His voice was husky, humbly entreating; but Lisa's eyes hardened, and she snatched her hands away from him.

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"You don't say," she snapped scathingly. "Well then maybe there's something to be said for a snow man after all."

He didn't seem to notice her sarcasm, for his lips were grave when he told her, "Look, I've told you I'm sorry and I really mean it. Now won't you believe me, please?" His lips quirked upward in an engaging grin. "Because I can't have you angry with me. You see now that we've met I won't forget you. No matter what you say, I'm coming back. In the meantime there isn't any law to stop me from dreaming about you." His grin widened, revealing even, strong teeth that blazed whitely against his bronzed skin.

Before Lisa could answer he was gone, walking down the drive, his blond hair gleaming in the sun, his shoulders squared against the wind.

For a moment Lisa watched his vanishing figure. Then slowly she raised puzzled eyes to the mirror above the mantel. She saw reflected there a slim young girl with a pale, heart-shaped face. Her eyes beneath feathery lashes and gently curving brows were deeply violet, like velvety black pansies. And her coral lips, above her determined little chin, were delicately arched. Her chestnut hair was lit with tawny lights and waved naturally into its attractive cap of curls. She was dressed boyishly in a shirt and slacks, and sandals were strapped about her small feet.

A short time ago her wardrobe had consisted mostly of evening gowns, boldly styled with plunging necklines and sheath-like proportions, heavily decorated with sequins and beads to catch the blazing spotlight. But then she had been one of the stars at the Latin Casino, and now. . . .

The honk of an automobile horn broke across her reflections. Lisa jerked herself back to the present and glanced at her wrist watch. With the excitement of Bruce Heatherington barging in she had completely forgotten about Niles' coming, and now he was here and she wasn't even dressed. Calling quick instructions to Mattie, she escaped into her bedroom and shut the door.

She tore off her clothes and slipped into a clinging frock of palest violet because Niles loved her to wear that color. She ran a comb hastily through her tawny curls, smoothed a film of fragrant powder over her flushed cheeks. Then she hurried to greet Niles.

He was waiting on the couch, a slim, gracefully built man with the supple movements of a dancer. Beneath his sleek cap of ebony hair his black eyes glinted impatiently. When Lisa called to him as she came into the room, he jumped to his feet. Swiftly he crossed the space that separated them and took her in his arms.

AS HIS eager lips closed over hers a strange, inexplicable thing happened to Lisa. Abruptly the memory of Bruce's kiss flashed into her mind, and suddenly, without any understandable reason, she felt shy and awkward in Niles's embrace. "Niles," she protested with a forced laugh as she turned her head evasively and slipped from his arms.

"You look good enough to eat, honey," Niles told her lovingly as he led her to the couch. Then triumphantly he ordered her to close her eyes and hold out her hand. When she opened her eyes again Lisa caught her breath. A small but perfect diamond set in a circle of platinum winked boldly on her finger.

"It's not very big," Niles explained hurriedly, "but I guess it will do until I can buy you a bigger one, won't it honey?"

She swallowed nervously, wondering desperately what in the world could have happened to her. This was Niles's big moment. It should have meant everything to her. Instead she felt almost as though she were only rehearsing a scene from some play. But maybe it was just her jangled nerves, she told herself stern-

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ly. Everything *had* seemed unreal and dreamlike here anyway. So she made her lips smile, raised her puzzled eyes to his anxious ones. "It's beautiful," she murmured softly, "only I wasn't expecting it so soon."

But later, when Niles took her in his arms again and his lips imperiously claimed hers, it seemed as though Bruce Heatherington was in the room watching her, his eyes scornful, a teasing grin lifting the corners of his mobile mouth. And distressingly, Lisa again found Niles's passionate kisses repulsive and she couldn't help jerking her head away.

His face flooded a dull red, and his eyes opened speculatively. "What gives, Lisa?" he asked, wondering and hurt.

Swiftly a poignant wave of regret rolled over her. Niles was too fine, too kind to be hurt, and she hated herself for her inexplicable behavior. "Don't mind me, Niles," she apologized humbly. "I guess my nerves are just shot. Everything upsets me lately."

Immediately his eyes softened. "It's been an upsetting time for you Lisa, I know. But it won't be much longer now. Zimmerman wants to see me tonight to talk things over. That's why I must rush back now. But as soon as the contract is signed and our sailing date is set, your worries will be over. We'll be married right away and then it'll be merry old London and our names up in lights."

He broke off abruptly as he stared down at the cigarette stub Bruce Heatherington had dropped into the ash tray on the coffee table. "Don't tell me you've taken to smoking imported cigarettes, Lisa? Or does Mattie's taste run to expensive Egyptian tobacco?"

Lisa frowned, remembering. "A man—Bruce Heatherington, he said his name was—dropped in to use the phone. He's an artist and has opened a studio down the road," she explained.

"Heatherington? Seems like I've heard that name just recently." Niles's forehead wrinkled, then smoothed. "Well, anyway it doesn't matter. Only don't get too friendly. We mustn't slip up now."

He moved toward the hall, and Lisa felt a stab of guilt at her relief in his leaving. Without knowing why, she suddenly wanted to be alone. "Don't worry about me," she promised nervously. "I'm practically the hermit of Poinciana Road."

She raised her head for his good-by kiss, made her eyes smile. "Thank you for my ring," she whispered dutifully. "It's beautiful."

BUT WHEN he was gone she sat down on the porch steps and pressed her fingers to her throbbing temples. Something was wrong. There wasn't any use pretending longer. And all at once she was frightened.

Why should she suddenly feel this way about Niles, she asked herself bewilderedly. Niles was the man she loved! He was the man who had rescued her from the chorus of a cheap night-club, taught her everything she knew about dancing, made her his partner, and finally landed them both top billing at the Latin Casino in Miami.

No wonder she had adored him, reveled in his thoughtfulness and kindness. And when Chris Michaelson first began coming to the Casino and sending Lisa flowers she would have sent him swiftly on his way if the manager of the Casino hadn't begged her to "go easy." Chris was an important man in Miami, the manager had told Lisa. His patronage and approval could benefit the Casino a great deal. So that was why Lisa sat at Chris's table on several occasions between shows, thanked him prettily for his exquisite flowers, and once even let him take her home in his chauffeur-driven limousine.

But the night she had found a diamond bracelet hidden in the center of his orchid corsage, Lisa knew she must put an end

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to his interest in her immediately. Across his card Chris had scrawled, "Will be working late at my office tonight. Why don't you drop in and let me know if you like the bracelet. . . ."

Without any hesitation and not wanting to bother Niles, who was going over some new music with the orchestra leader, Lisa shrugged on her coat, wrapped the bracelet in her handkerchief and slipped it into her pocket. Then quickly she walked the six short blocks from the Casino to Chris Michaelson's office, which was picturesquely set on the roof of a tall furniture mart. The entire building was deserted at this late hour, but Lisa entered the self-operating elevator, turned on the light and sent the grilled cage zooming upward.

Chris personally opened the door of his office at her knock. He wasn't an unattractive man, but there was a certain softness and lack of strength in the molding of his mouth and jaw that Lisa didn't quite trust.

She attempted to make brief work of her errand. "Of course I can't accept this, Chris," she told him coolly as she placed the bracelet in his hand. "It must be worth a small fortune. I don't understand your thinking you could give it to me."

The smile never left Chris's lips, but his eyes narrowed. "Oh, I say now," he protested lightly, "don't take it so seriously. It's just a bangle I picked up and thought would look well on your lovely arm." Boldly he placed his hand on her wrist, smoothed the creamy flesh beneath his fingers.

Lisa unconsciously shivered. "I must run now. Our second show goes on soon," she said nervously.

Chris continued to smile blandly. "Okay, I'll telephone for a cab. But this mustn't change anything, baby. We're still friends, aren't we?"

Suddenly his grinning, assured face with its complacent, bold eyes so close to hers was unbearable. Lisa wanted to shove him away. But wryly she remembered the manager of the Casino. She mustn't do anything to jeopardize Niles's and her standing with him. "Don't bother about the cab," she managed quietly as she turned to leave, "and of course we're still friends."

Then quickly Chris's well-manicured fingers on her shoulders halted her. "Don't you think we'd better seal that bargain with a little kiss then," he suggested insinuatingly.

Lisa felt a hysterical desire to scream, only she realized it would be futile, for there wasn't anyone to hear her. She had been an impulsive, thoughtless fool to come here like this anyway, she told herself angrily, as she tried to wrench herself free. But Chris only laughed a little confident laugh as he tightened his hold, turned her around and forced her close to him. Then triumphantly he bent his head, and sickeningly Lisa closed her eyes.

But the moment she dreaded never came, for across the lamplight a woman's voice rang out, sharply, mockingly, "I didn't know you were having company, darling!"

Chris dropped his arms as though he had been stabbed. Trembling, Lisa swung around.

A HEAVILY built woman dressed in expensive tweeds was watching them from the doorway. Her face in spite of her brightly painted lips and rouged cheeks was drawn and haggard, and there were despairing shadows in her bitter eyes.

"Mildred! You mustn't jump to conclusions!" Chris's voice was ragged, pleading. "Let me explain—"

She raised her chin proudly and laughed in his face. "Chris, you're priceless. What conclusion do you imagine any sane wife could come to when she finds her husband making love to another woman?"

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"But Mildred, honestly, this kid means nothing to me. I—"

Mildred Michaelson silenced her husband with an imperious wave of her hand. "No woman could ever mean much to you for long, Chris," she said scornfully. She stopped, gripped her side as if caught in a spasm of unbearable pain. Her face twisted, and momentarily she seemed like an old woman. In a moment she lifted her head, squared her shoulders and went on, "However, tonight I'm going to see to it that you don't easily forget *me*."

Before Lisa had any inkling of the woman's intentions she drew a gun from her handbag, held it to her heart and pulled the trigger. A minute later she toppled to the floor, and a threading of scarlet began to stain the pastel carpet.

Lisa shut her eyes to blot out the horrible scene. When she opened them again she found Chris bending over his wife's body, his eyes terrified, his jaw slack. Dazed he turned to Lisa. Then savagely he shouted, "Get out of here now. Immediately. No one saw you come. No one need ever know you were here. Mildred suffered from carcinoma of the hip. Her condition was hopeless. I'll tell the police that's why she killed herself. Your name needn't be even mentioned. Only for God's sake go now and keep your mouth shut."

Afterward Lisa wondered how she got back to the Casino for she seemed to have lost all control of her senses. Terrified, she blurted out the whole story to Niles, clinging desperately to his encircling arms.

"There now," he soothed. "It's a piece of wretched business, of course, your having to witness anything so horrible. And the worst part is it may do us both a great deal of harm."

"What do you mean?" Lisa demanded tearfully.

Niles frowned, lit a cigarette. "Zimmerman was out front tonight and caught our act. Wants it for a revue he's producing next season in London. It's to be called the YANKEE CLIPPER and everything in it will be typically American."

"Zimmerman? Oh, Niles, honestly? But wouldn't that be just the break we've prayed for?"

He sighed, crushed out his just-lit cigarette. "Sure, honey. The best ever. Only Zimmerman has always prided himself on producing what he calls 'family type' shows. Funny, fast moving, but clean as a whistle. He's built up a fine reputation for himself that way and has an abhorrence of scandal of any kind—won't even hire anyone about whom there's been any bad publicity. So if you get entangled in the Michaelson mess it would definitely mean the end of all our hopes with him."

Nervously he began to pace the cramped floor of the dressing room as he went on. "However you certainly are an innocent victim of circumstances, and I can't for the life of me see where you would help anybody by voluntarily involving yourself. The woman is dead, and if Michaelson gave you the true facts, which we can easily check in the newspapers, they'll blame her suicide on her physical condition all right. But even if Michaelson's philanderings were wholly responsible for the woman's not wanting to live, you surely aren't to blame. So why not forget the whole thing! Say nothing and lay low."

Excitedly he lit another cigarette, began to plan. "I'll tell the manager here you're not well, that I'll take over for a while with a couple of solo numbers. Then I'll find some comfortable place for you to stay, away from the bright lights. We'll carefully watch how this all turns out and when everything blows over and Zimmerman hands us our contract we'll take a powder and forget the entire mess."

"But why must I hide out like a criminal?" Lisa protested. "Don't you believe me, Niles?"

"Of course, honey," he assured her pa-

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tiently. "But what if someone did spot you coming out of Michaelson's offices? Don't you see that then your best bet to avoid further recognition is to get out of town?" Soothingly he cradled her quivering body in his arms, brushed away her tears. "It's a bum set-up, Lisa, but trust old Niles to get you free," he had murmured lovingly.

So now why, Lisa asked herself fretfully as she brought her thoughts back to the present, was she worrying? Mildred Michaelson's suicide was officially judged to have been caused by her illness, and so far nothing had developed that could possibly implicate Lisa in the affair.

The days that she had spent in this cottage Niles had found for her on Poinciana Road, edging the everglades and complete with faithful, efficient Mattie, had not been unpleasant ones. So it was just plain nonsense to let a case of jittery nerves upset her this way. She had Niles's love to protect her. His ring on her finger assured her of that. She would flatly push all this silliness out of her mind! Anway maybe all girls got jittery when they began to actually think about their wedding, she decided hopefully as she got up and went into the house in answer to Mattie's call for dinner.

THE cat was crying to get in. Mattie was out in the garden hanging up tea towels, so Lisa hurried to the door. As she swung it open her body stiffened and she let out her breath in a stunned hiss that sounded like escaping steam.

"Good morning, beautiful. It's such a heavenly day I just couldn't stay indoors and paint, so I thought I'd come over and see if you wouldn't go for a swim in the lake with me."

Bruce Heatherington stood confidently on the stairs, looking very blond and slim in the morning sunlight, dressed briefly in vivid blue shorts that exactly matched the color of his eyes. A towel was draped negligently over his bronzed chest, and he wore thonged sandals on his bare feet.

Lisa bit her lips in surprised annoyance. "I told you yesterday I'm too busy to take time out for anything. Anyway, you should be home yourself waiting for the electric man," she accused.

"I left a note for him and put the key under the mat," he countered blandly.

Lisa would have liked to smack the grin from his lips, but she forced herself to say sweetly, "Well, thanks just the same, but my answer is no."

Determinedly she picked up the cat and turned inside when his hand on her arm stopped her. "Look," he said boyishly, a humble huskiness threading his voice, "please come with me today and I'll prove I can be as harmless as that little kitten." He smiled winningly and, as his fingers tightened upon her arm, she felt again that strange helplessness that his commanding

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eyes brought upon her. For a moment it seemed almost as though there were some invisible cord drawing her slowly but surely toward him. Then the cat sprang from her arms, and the spell was abruptly broken. Angrily Lisa shook herself free from his touch. "No sale," she said dryly. "Better try somebody else if you're lonesome."

For a disturbing moment he remained quiet, watching her with eyes that were veiled with enigmatic shadows. Then at last he shook his head ruefully. "All right, gorgeous. You win this time. But remember, this is only the second round. I'm a determined fighter and I'm not giving up. I'll be seeing you tonight anyway." He grinned teasingly. "In my dreams, that is."

"Honestly, of all the conceit—" Lisa began, when lamely her words trailed off into silence. For Bruce hadn't stopped to listen. He was stalking down the drive, his body a flash of bronze against the glaring sunlight, the melody of his gay whistling drifting back to her on the morning breeze.

"I'm sorry, Mattie. That was delicious, but I'm just not hungry today, I guess." Apologetically Lisa pushed aside her daintily prepared luncheon tray and lit a cigarette. All morning she had tried to interest herself in reading but somehow she couldn't concentrate, and now even luncheon hadn't tempted her.

Hating her inexplicable restlessness, she got up and decided on a walk. Perhaps she was just bored with remaining indoors and needed exercise, she thought. Twenty minutes later she moved out of the hot sunshine into the cool shadows of the everglades. It was a quiet, unearthly world here and as Lisa followed the dimly outlined path her thoughts began to stray. She hadn't any idea how far she had gone when she gradually became aware that she had lost the trail.

Perplexed, she crossed a patch of swamp grass and sat down on a fallen cypress stump to rest. Then the unbelievable happened. Immediately the stump sank beneath her weight and she found herself knee deep in slime.

FOR a split second terror tightened her breathing. Then reason returned, and sensibly she reached out, grasped a hanging vine and carefully began to inch herself back onto solid ground. In a little while she was safe, but when she stared down at her mud-stained dress and bare feet she let out a wail of dismay. For the suction of the sinkhole had pulled off her strapless playshoes and now she knew they were buried somewhere in the mire, out of sight and definitely out of reach.

"Do you know that my mother never would let me go barefoot!" A man's amused voice cut across her discovery.

Lisa whirled around. Bruce was standing a few feet from her, a mocking twist lifting his lips.

Lisa could have screamed. Of all the humiliating predicaments! No matter what she did that blond devil persisted in troubling her thoughts and now to turn up at a moment like this!

"Oh, I go barefoot most of the time," she snapped bitterly.

His grin widened. "Need any help," he asked casually.

"Not unless you can dig up my shoes."

He shook his head regretfully. "I don't imagine anyone could do that now. There are spots in these 'glades that despite their deceptive appearance of solidity are actually bottomless. As a matter of fact it's not particularly safe to venture in here unless you know exactly where you're going."

His lips were serious but his eyes still danced with laughing lights, and Lisa was acutely aware of the ludicrous spectacle she made with her mud-stained clothes and bare feet. "In that case I won't keep you," she said pointedly.

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He sighed, ran his hands restlessly through his blond hair. "Look," he began patiently, "It won't be so bad walking in the cool swamp here. But hoofing it barefoot down the burning highway to your place would be sheer murder. That pavement gets hot enough to fry eggs. So why not play it sensibly and let me help you to my place? We'll pick up my car there and I can drive you home. Okay?"

Lisa would have given anything to refuse but she realized she didn't dare. No dancer could risk bruising or blistering her feet. Regarding the burning highway, Bruce was only too right.

So humbly she swallowed her pride and nodded her assent. Then, like an obedient puppy, she fell in behind him as he started up the path.

When they reached the pavement and before she realized his intentions, Bruce caught her up in his arms. Then quickly he struck off down the road. As Lisa helplessly relaxed in his arms the wind tossed her hair across his cheek, brought the fragrance of her flawless ivory skin to his nostrils. Automatically his arms tightened and his eyes darkened in puzzled uncertainty as he walked on. But gradually the determined line of his lips softened and without knowing why, Lisa felt his heart begin to pound against her.

When at last he reached his place and set her down inside the studio he said, "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a second."

Curious, Lisa gazed at the canvases stacked face to the wall, at the easel set in front of the north window opposite an undraped throne. A paint-smeared palette lay on a table lined with tubes of oils, and beside it was a pile of charcoal sketches.

Lisa would have liked to glance through them but Bruce returned too quickly. He was garbed in tropic whites and a canary-yellow sweater, and his hair gleamed like spun gold from a recent bout with water and brush. He carried a basin of water, a bar of soap and a clean turkish towel.

"Sit down here, we'll soak away some of that awful slime," he ordered pointing to the couch.

Lisa felt awkward and shy as she obeyed and placed her slim feet in the water. As gently as if he were bathing a little child Bruce sponged away the muck and then wrapped the towel carefully about Lisa's feet.

As she stared nervously at his bent head Lisa had a queer almost uncontrollable desire to run her fingers through his crisp blond hair. Without thinking, she half raised her hand when he looked up unexpectedly. She dropped her hand as if it had been burned and felt the shamed color rise up in her cheeks.

"There's a little swelling in your left ankle," he said casually. "Maybe you twisted it in jerking yourself out of the muck. Anyway it's nothing to worry about."

WITHOUT stopping to reason Lisa murmured, "Oh, of course not. What's a sprained ankle to a dancer?"

"So you're a dancer?" Bruce's eyes widened speculatively and he waited for her answer as if somehow it were very important.

Lisa could have bitten off her tongue. How could she have been so thoughtless! "I have danced," she murmured evasively.

"You don't say. In Miami? Where? I was wondering all along if I hadn't seen you somewhere before. And incidentally what *is* your name?"

There was a strange insistence in his voice that made Lisa afraid. "I'm Lisa Garland and I've not danced anywhere lately," she said curtly, getting up and moving nervously away. "But I must be going now. Mattie will be worried. You'll drive me home, won't you?"

For a second he remained quiet, watching her with eyes that seemed to penetrate the very secrets of her heart. Then

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to her relief: "Surely," he agreed pleasantly. "I'll bring the car around in front."

Fifteen minutes later he stopped his automobile in front of Lisa's porch. Quickly she opened the door and jumped out. "I'm terribly indebted to you," she told him almost formally. "I don't know what I would have done. Perhaps some time I can repay the favor."

"You can. Right now. I've been wanting desperately to paint you ever since I first saw you. So won't you take a couple of afternoons off and pose for me? Please."

Lisa's jaw tightened as once again Niles's warning rang through her mind. "I—I'd like to," she stammered, "but I'm afraid I won't be able to make it. Anyway thanks so much and—"

"Wait!" Bruce's command was clipped and compelling. In a flash he was out of the car and beside her, his cupped palm beneath her chin determinedly lifting her face to his. "What in the devil are you afraid of, Lisa? From the moment we met you've acted frightened, as though I were going to hurt you. Tell me what's eating you. You haven't robbed a bank or witnessed a killing lately, have you?"

Lisa forced back the fear his words sent zooming through her heart, and her gay, brittle laughter rang out scornfully. "Certainly not. What in the world makes you think I'm frightened of anything?"

"Then why won't you pose for me?"

Lisa swallowed desperately. She felt exactly like a bird trapped in a cage, but underscoring her fear she shrewdly realized she must, at all costs, smother any suspicions Bruce might possibly harbor. So helplessly she raised her eyes to his. "All right. You win. When do you want me to come?" she asked lightly.

LISA looked at the little clock on the mantel. Only five minutes more and she could stretch her tired muscles and relax. But in the meantime she must continue the rather strenuous pose.

Shyly she stole a glance at him. He wore paint-stained slacks, and at the moment his forehead was deeply lined with a frown as he concentrated on the canvas before him.

Was it only a week ago since she had first come here, Lisa wondered. Every detail of the studio was so familiar to her now it seemed as if she must have always known this huge old room with its cypress rafters. All the fear and stiffness she had first felt in Bruce's presence was gone now. It seemed quite as natural to be isolated with him here for hours while he painted as if—well, as if this were her very home.

And somehow Bruce had changed, too. He didn't tease her anymore, and just lately he seemed to have lost all interest in asking her those probing questions that had upset and worried her at first.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Lisa blinked, pulled herself back to reality. Bruce was wiping his hands on an oily rag, looking at her expectantly.

"They're not for sale," she evaded, climbing down from the throne and stretching gratefully. "Anyway I guess I was just dreaming."

"Want to see it now?" For the first time since beginning the picture he was inviting her to inspect his work.

"Oh, Bruce. Is it finished?" Eagerly, like an excited child greeting a new toy, she ran to the easel.

Bruce had painted her dressed in an old Castilian shawl with a tea rose pinned at her throat, warming the pale ivory of her flawless flesh. The violet tones of the background of his painting were subdued, deepening the velvety purple of her eyes, complimenting the tawny lights in her hair. The clear coral of her curving fresh lips was the only note of bright color in the picture.

For a moment or two Lisa stared at the painting. Then her eyes misted. "Am I really like that?" she asked humbly.

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Bruce was watching her oddly, a queer light in his eyes. Suddenly, as though thrusting aside forever some unseen barrier, he caught her to him. "Don't you know just how lovely you are?" he asked huskily.

LISA trembled at his touch. "Bruce, I—" she began when his lips swiftly silenced her. Hungrily he kissed, like a man who has been long starved.

When finally he let her go he was breathing deeply and there was a grim set to his lips. "Lisa, there's something I've got to tell you. Somehow I've got to make you understand. You see—"

The sharp tooting of an automobile horn drowned out his words. He jerked up his head in surprise and swung around to face the door just as a pair of high heels clicked up the wooden stairs.

"Bruce, darling. Aren't you surprised?" A laughing, slim girl in a gaily striped silk frock stood in the doorway wagging a finger playfully at him. "And aren't you the naughty boy to hide yourself away like this without giving me a ring. Why, when I read in the newspapers that you were in Florida I almost had to force your servants to give me this address."

Bruce muttered something under his breath. Then quickly he came forward. "Hello, Gay," he said evenly. "This is a surprise. But let me introduce you to Miss Garland. She's a neighbor here who has been kind enough to pose for me. Lisa, Miss Chandler."

Gay Chandler's eyes swept Lisa's shawled figure with a shrewdly calculating glance. Then she smiled coolly. "How wonderfully sweet of her," she said. "But now you've absolutely got to knock off work and feed me, Bruce. I'm starving. And I've got scads of news to tell you about everybody."

Lisa's mind was a mass of chaotic emotions but as she saw Gay take assured possession of Bruce's leather lounge chair she winced under a quick stab of jealousy, and on a sudden, without sane reason, she hated the insolent, beautiful intruder. She couldn't help feeling childishly like an unwanted third. So impulsively she shrugged off the shawl and unpinned the rose. Then quickly murmuring some invented excuse she slipped through the door before Bruce could stop her and ran swiftly home.

Inside her bedroom with the door locked Lisa faced the truth for the first time. *She was in love with Bruce!* It didn't make sense but there it was. Irrefutable, inescapable. The knowledge must have been buried in her brain all along, only she hadn't understood. It had taken Bruce's kisses this morning to finally open her eyes. And now that she was awake at last, all the bewildering emotions that had been disturbing her lately fitted together like the smoothly aligned parts of

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some machine: Her growing aloofness in Niles's presence; the odd helplessness she had always felt with Bruce; and the inexplicable aliveness she had felt these past days, as if for the first time in her life she had really begun to live.

Stunned at her discovery, she stared at Niles's ring. Then slowly she slipped it from her finger. She would never wear it again. Whatever she had once felt for Niles, perhaps a combination of their mutual interest in dancing and a deep appreciation of his wonderful help and kindness to her, it had betrayed her into thinking it was love. But of course now she couldn't go on being engaged to him. Even if she had wanted to, it wouldn't be fair to Niles. He deserved better than second best.

And now her heart belonged to Bruce! Wonderingly, lovingly she murmured his name. Bruce. . . . Bruce Heatherington.

Lisa was in the kitchen preparing tea later in the afternoon when she looked up and found Niles in the doorway.

"Niles!" she cried, startled. "How you surprised me. But is anything the matter?" she added timidly, troubled by his unsmiling, worried face.

"I've been trying all day to reach you on the phone, and couldn't get an answer," he said quietly.

Lisa dried her hands on the towel, turned off the gas under the tea kettle. "It's Mattie's day off, and I was out all afternoon," she explained nervously.

He didn't answer. He was staring at her ringless hand, and slowly his face whitened beneath its tan.

Lisa felt as though she were thrusting a knife into his heart but she couldn't help herself. Quickly, before she lost courage, she told him everything. "And so now I can't go on being your dancing partner, Niles, and I've got to give you back your ring," she finished, miserable and heartsick. "I'm—I'm terribly sorry but I made a mistake, a horrible mistake. I do love you. I always will, I guess. But not the way you want me to."

She would never forget the pain in his stricken eyes, the bitter disillusioned twist to his lips. But at last he spoke. "I guess I saw this coming, Lisa. You're not much of an actress and I've been afraid all along that you over-rated your feeling for me." He stopped, smiled mirthlessly. "Only I loved you so very much I was willing to take a chance."

"Oh, Niles, don't, please. I hate myself." Lisa's tears blurred her vision, but gently Niles took out his handkerchief and sponged them away.

"Don't, Lisa," he ordered quietly. "I'll get along, and it's far better to find out the truth now before it's too late." He sighed and shrugged his shoulders wearily. "Zimmerman will probably take me on as a single. And then new faces, new interests—that will help."

For a seeming eternity he gazed deep into her eyes as if memorizing them forever. Then he asked abruptly, "Who is the lucky guy, Lisa?"

SHE shivered as if an icy blast had struck her. "It's Bruce Heatherington—the artist I told you about who lives down the road. I've been posing for him. I didn't tell you when you came out before because you warned me to avoid getting too friendly with him and I was afraid you'd worry."

She heard his protests like an angry roar, felt his fingers dig deep into her arms in desperate urgency. "Lisa, Lisa, you poor kid," he muttered. "What have you let yourself in for?"

"What do you mean?" She was staring at him as though he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

Niles's lips narrowed. "That's why I've been trying to get you all day. To warn you. To tell you that Bruce Heatherington is Mildred Michaelson's brother."

"No!" Her denial was almost a scream.

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"But it's absolutely true." Niles voice was sharp with conviction as he jerked a clipping from his wallet and handed it to Lisa. "Here's an article from this morning's *Times*. It's about Chris Michaelson attempting to break his wife's will because she crossed him up and left all her money to her brother. There's Heatherington's picture taken in his New York studio. When you first mentioned his name I felt I'd heard it before."

Unbelieving, Lisa stared at the scrap of paper Niles had given her. Bruce smiled out at her with his beloved, familiar grin. Brokenly she turned away to hide the heartbreak in her eyes.

Niles dropped his hands from her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Lisa," he muttered. "But I had to tell you. I honestly don't know what Heatherington can be up to but the evidence is stacked against him. It's all too pat to be entirely coincidental."

Fiercely Lisa swung around. Her bleak despair was gone. Suddenly she felt strong and secure in her faith in Bruce. She had been a fool to doubt him for a moment. Surely his kisses had told her of his love. "But it is just coincidence," she insisted defiantly. "Bruce wouldn't hurt me like that."

Niles shrugged. "I hope you are right. Of course this whole set-up now is pointless if you don't intend to sign up with Zimmerman, and Heatherington couldn't actually become a threat to you in any event. But I'd hate you to lose your head over someone who might be trying to double-cross you."

Lisa didn't answer. All at once she felt tired, wanting desperately to be alone, to think things out. Silently she slipped into her bedroom. In a moment she returned and dropped Niles' ring into his hand. "Good-by, Niles," she murmured huskily. "Thanks, thanks for everything."

When he had gone she stared around her as if seeing the kitchen for the first time. Aimlessly she pushed aside the tea things, folded and refolded the tea towel. Then abruptly she knew what she was going to do. She couldn't stand it any longer. She was going to see Bruce. Prove that she had been right in her faith in him.

The studio was dark when she reached it. No one answered her knock, so timidly she turned the latch and when it yielded walked hesitantly inside.

A tray of soiled dishes still rested on the coffee table where Bruce had served his guest luncheon, and scarlet-stained cigarette ends half filled one of his pottery ash trays.

As though seeking an old friend, Lisa absently picked up the Spanish shawl from a chair and held it tightly in her feverish fingers as she restlessly moved across the room, deciding to wait for Bruce's return.

As she passed the desk the shawl caught on a drawer handle and jerked it open. Impatiently Lisa lifted the shawl free. Then abruptly she stared into the open drawer. The bracelet Chris Michaelson had sent her that night was there along with Lisa's picture cut from an advertisement of the Latin Casino. Beside it was a letter from Bruce to a prominent Miami lawyer.

Have located Lisa Garland, he had typed on his battered portable, *and have contrived our first meeting but not very successful. She is aloof and hostile. Must concentrate on breaking down her resistance. Hope to have better results in my next report. . . .*

The words danced before Lisa's eyes like mocking savages. Then fiercely she fought back her tears. So Niles had been right! It wasn't coincidence after all that had led Bruce to her door. What a fool she had been, handing him her heart as cheaply as if it were a penny valentine.

She gasped to force the air into her stifled lungs. Then she swung on her heels and ran blindly home.

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MATTIE had been paid. The bags were packed and strapped. Now Lisa waited impatiently for the taxi she had ordered to take her to the train. The unbearable pain was gone now. In its place was a dreamlike confusion, as though she were sinking slowly into a prolonged anesthetic.

Unseeingly she stared out the window at the star-studded sky. In the moonlight the rows of scarlet-blossoming trees which gave the highway its name rustled protestingly in the soft breeze. And silent and watchful in the yard, Mattie's cat was a dark blur against the quick grass.

Mattie's touch on her shoulder roused Lisa. "The taxi's come, Miss Lisa," Mattie said regretfully.

Lisa nodded and began gathering up her purse and gloves while the cab driver and Mattie carried out the bags. When Lisa turned she found Bruce blocking the door.

"Lisa! What the devil is the meaning of this. I went into town after Gay left to pick up some supplies. When I got back I found you had dropped your handkerchief and so knew you'd been at the studio. Thought you might want something, so I hurried right over."

Lisa stopped dead. For just a moment the sight of his handsome blond head tore at her heart. Then proudly she raised her head. "You forgot to mail that letter to your lawyer when you were in town, didn't you, Bruce?" she asked scornfully.

His eyes widened in astonishment, then darkened with quick understanding. "Lisa, who the devil has been talking to you, and what in the name of time do you mean running away like this?"

She smiled icily. "It's no use in your pretending any longer, Bruce, because I'm on to your little game. In fact," she invented pluckily, trying to protect her pride, "I've been wise for some time, only I wanted to see just how far you were prepared to go. That's why I led you on."

"Lisa, wait! You don't understand. You've got to listen to me." Roughly he reached out and caught her to him, his face grim, his eyes blazing.

Fiercely she jerked herself free of his touch. "I haven't time to listen to any more of your pretty speeches," she snapped. "My cab is waiting."

Swiftly she darted past him and raced to the cab. A moment later the car started down the drive just as Bruce pounded after it. Briefly its headlights swept his angry, blond face. Then he was left swiftly behind.

The Sunshine Limited roared into the night, and in a moment or two Sebring was lost in the tropical darkness. Lisa settled back wearily against the pillowed seat. It had been an extravagant gesture buying this compartment, she realized, but the Pullmans had been crowded, and she had wanted desperately to remain alone.

She wondered what Niles was doing now, hoped terribly he would get over his hurt. Then her lips twisted. Why couldn't life work out sometimes? Why couldn't she have loved Niles and made him happy instead of falling for Bruce, who only. . . .

An insistent tap at her door broke off her bitter thoughts. That would be the porter, come to make up her berth. "Come in," she called quietly.

The door opened and a man entered. Lisa heard the click as he locked the door behind him. Startled, she looked up. Then she felt as though she must be dreaming.

Bruce was facing her, his mouth grim, his eyes unyielding.

Lisa tried to control her emotions. "If you don't leave at once," she began heatedly, "I'll ring for the porter and have you thrown out." Angrily she reached for the bell.

BUT BRUCE was too quick for her. He leaped forward with the supple grace of a jungle cat, caught her arm and forced her to sit down again.

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"How chivalrous," Lisa snapped. "And aren't we strong! If you ever need work better try Ringling's."

Bruce didn't bother to answer that. Slowly he bent over her, tightening his grip on her arms. "Before Gay Chandler came to the studio this morning I started to explain something to you, and tried again tonight before you ran out on me," he said evenly. "But now if I have to hold you here all night you're going to let me finish."

"Really? Be brief then. I'm tired and want to go to bed," Lisa ordered like an impudent child.

As though she hadn't even spoken Bruce continued crisply, "Chris Michaelson hadn't a penny before my sister married him, set him up in business, and he was still very much dependent upon her for funds. I had heard rumors that he was stepping out lately, but I was in New York, and Mildred never confirmed a word of this gossip in her letters to me.

"When I flew to Miami for her funeral it was at first only natural for me to believe Chris when he said she had killed herself because of her great fear of the increasing pain she would suffer in her illness. And the doctor's report backed up this story. But after I got over my first shock I began to realize that there simply must have been something else besides that to make Mildred lose all desire to live. She wasn't a coward and she had too balanced a mind to let fear of pain result in her suicide."

Bruce stopped, sighed as if the very words hurt him. But stubbornly he went on. "And two things encouraged my line of reasoning. One was a diamond bracelet I accidentally found in the glove compartment of Chris's car when I searched there for matches one day while I waited for him to drive me into town. It was a small-sized inflexible band, and as Mildred was quite athletic and had unusually large hands she could have never gotten it on her wrist. So obviously Chris had purchased it for someone else."

"And the other?" Unconsciously Lisa leaned forward, her eyes tense.

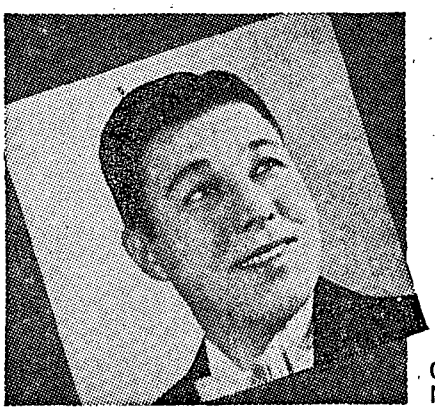
Bruce laughed dryly. "The other item was that Mildred had canceled her old will the very day of her death. Her new will left every penny to me."

"And Chris wanted to contest this?"

He nodded. "Yes. Chris claimed Mildred's illness had clouded her thinking. That she loved him deeply and would never have cut him off flat if she'd been sane."

He shook his forehead free of his tousled blond hair. "The money wasn't important to me," he admitted grimly. "There's always been plenty of it in our family. Only I wasn't going to let Chris try and grab Mildred's inheritance if she hadn't wanted him to have it . . . if his

(Please turn to page 126)



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Precious Time

Time was important to Cindy—until she met a man who showed her a pleasant way to waste it.

"I guess you're going to be busy tonight, Cindy," Don said at the door. "I'll be seeing you later."

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By ELIZABETH RING

CINDY WAS COMPOSING the third paragraph of chapter five when the lights went out with a startling suddenness. It was definitely the last of a whole, maddening series of straws! Furiously she hurled her pencil into the darkness and listened to it clatter against the copper kettle that hung by the fireplace. Then it was quiet again, except for the everlasting chatter of the katydids.

She felt quick, futile tears sting her eyes but she bit her lip, determined not to let them flow. Tears wouldn't help the electrical storm or bring the lights back on, that was for sure.

She stumbled to her sandled feet and groped her way across the bumpy braided rug to the dining room. She found a candle and lit it, and shielded the bending flame from the house's draughts as she

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cautiously went down the steep cellar stairs. The fuse box, she thought. Maybe it only needs a fuse.

But none of the fuses had blown out and as she started back up the stairs, she silently cursed Barry White—in spite of the fact that he was the handsomest man she'd ever known, and her publisher, and practically her reason for existing.

"Rent a house up in the country, someplace like Vermont," he advised. "Get away from the city's distractions. And you'll have the book finished for me right on time in the fall."

Only it hadn't worked out as easily as it sounded. Every day there was some new problem connected with the house that she must wrestle with. If it wasn't faulty electrical lines, the spring was sure to be dry, and she'd have to cart water from the nearby stream; or her car, which had taken a lot of punishment on these back-country roads, would get temperamental and refuse to start. It was always something to intrude on her work.

Suddenly, as she reached the top of the cellar stairs, a puff of wind blew her candle out and at the same instant there was a loud pounding at the heavy, oak door. Heart in her mouth, she gripped the rough rail along the stairway, and stood shaking in the pitch black.

It was a long moment before her reason quieted her pounding heart. How silly to be frightened by sudden darkness! Storms always brought gusts of wind. And the front door—probably someone wanted to get in out of the rain. She shook herself thoroughly. Barry would certainly be scornful if he knew she were standing there, scared to death of a little darkness.

BUT IT wasn't raining yet—only wind and lightning. And when she relit the candle and opened the front door, it was no sodden wayfarer begging shelter, but a young man with green eyes and red hair. He leaned a plaid-shirted shoulder against the door jamb and, in the flickering candlelight, his grin looked elfish.

"Excuse me," he said in a friendly voice. "I was walking up the road and I saw your lights go out. I wondered if I could help—" His gaze on her gold-brown hair and ginghamed figure said he wondered a whole lot more.

Her answer was a moment in coming because she was busy taking in the width of his shoulders and the supple slenderness of his jean-clad hips. Then she caught herself. "No," she said politely but firmly. "No, thank you. I've just checked the fuse box and it seems to be all right. I guess this electrical storm has done something to the whole line."

"Are you sure about that fuse box?" She caught the laugh in his voice that said he didn't believe her capable of looking at a fuse box straight. There were times when she definitely resented her five-foot-two and turned-up nose. It gave people the impression that she was helpless.

"Yes," she said even more firmly, "I'm very sure about the fuse box. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm quite busy."

With the suddenness of a gunshot, the rain started. It drummed down in big, heavy drops that hit the ground like liquid bullets. The man hunched his shoulders against the onslaught and there was nothing she could do but ask him in.

She found more candles, asked the young man to sit down and excused herself to shut the windows around the house. When she returned he was standing over her card-table desk squinting at the page she'd been working on.

"So you're an author," he mused, frankly unashamed at being caught snooping.

"Well!" she couldn't help exclaiming sharply. "Really, I—"

He dropped the paper back to the desk abruptly. "Sorry. I didn't think you might not want me to look at it. Say! I

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haven't even introduced myself to you!"

He was so obviously chagrined that some of her quick anger melted. "No, you haven't," she said less sharply.

"Well, we should have known each other long ago. We're neighbors, and up here on the mountain, neighbors are important to each other. I'm Don Curtis. I do odd jobs around here." He walked to the window and stood looking out with his hands jammed in his jeans. "If you look dead straight between those two groves of trees down the road you can see my house around the bend—about a quarter-mile down the mountain."

She stood beside him and she could see a lone light. Funny she had never noticed it before. It had a friendly look in the black, turbulent night.

IN FACT, there was something very easy and friendly about Don Curtis. For the first time in a month of living on the mountain she felt relaxed, not champing at the bit to get back to New York City and pick up the pieces of her life there.

"I've seen your light burning in this room every night until late," Don said quietly behind her. "You must work pretty hard."

"I try to," she admitted, turning around. "It's the only way I'll ever get my book done."

She told him how she'd promised the book to her publisher by the middle of September. And she tried to cover her surprise when she found that he had never heard of her. "Well," she said as casually as she could, "my last book was a best seller."

He looked at her side-wise, amused. "Was it!" he exclaimed. "And how many books have you written?"

She flushed. "Just the one. I've only just begun."

He pointed a long finger at the small sign propped against a dictionary on her desk. The sign said "Do It Now!" Barry had given it to her, so she wouldn't be tempted to get side-tracked.

"You find inspiration in slogans," Don commented, and the amusement in his eyes was magnified in the candlelight.

She resented the way he made her feel silly about the motto. "It keeps me from loafing," she retorted defensively.

Don read aloud. "Guess it would work for some folks, but not me."

Her resentment blossomed. What did she care what worked for him! "I suppose there's a better time than 'now'?" she asked.

He stood up and stretched, yawning. "Oh, I believe in doing things, all right. Only not necessarily 'now.'" He grinned. "As the fellow says, why do it now? Tomorrow, you may not have to do it!"

She knew then that she and Don Curtis could never be friends. Given half a chance he'd be a bad influence on her. She was having a hard enough time with this book as it was! The writing of it was ten times the work she did on the first book, mostly because the first had taken her three years, and this one had to be finished by the fall.

Don's friendship, coupled with his take-it-easy attitude, would only be a fatal distraction to make the job infinitely harder. She knew too well how susceptible she was to ideas like Don's—ideas that would only lead her away from the only important things in her life—Barry White's love and respect. Yet, something pulled her toward Don and, almost frantically, she knew she must end this neighborliness right now!

"I really have to get to work now, Mr. Curtis," she said quickly. "It's stopped raining and if you'll excuse—"

He strolled leisurely toward the door. "You really ought to get away from that writing for a bit. How about the barn dance down at the community house tomorrow night? I think you'd like—"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Curtis,"

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she said firmly. "But I'm going to be very, very busy."

He stood, hands jammed in pockets, looking through the trees toward the light from his house. Then he grinned at her, impishly as if her seriousness were the funniest thing he'd seen in a long time. "Okay," he said easily. "It was just a thought. Incidentally, you'd better go see the power company about your lights if the trouble isn't in your fuse box. My house lights are on, so it's not trouble on the line."

She closed the door on his retreating back and sagged against it for a moment, relieved. Something about Don Curtis frightened her. It was almost as if he sensed her weakness and delighted in tantalizing it. She knew, as surely as if he'd said it aloud, that if she let him, he'd come between her and Barry! And nothing—no one—must ever do that!

She shook her head in wonderment as she went back to her desk. Some people had strange ideas about living! Odd jobs! Herself, she had work to do. And she felt a little proud as she sat down at the card table with only candlelight to work by. This was certainly carrying on under trying circumstances. If Barry could see her now, he'd be sure to applaud warmly.

SHE TRIED to gather up the threads of chapter five, but they were a tangled mess that she didn't have the energy to unravel. She looked hard at the sign that said "Do It Now!" Its message was imperative as ever and she tried again. But the mood was lost and finally, half exasperated and half resigned, she snatched the sign from the desk and carried it to her bureau where she tossed it, face down, in a drawer.

If it hadn't been for Don Curtis' intrusion on her privacy, she would have finished the chapter tonight and be at least partly caught up on her schedule!

She opened the drawer for a clean handkerchief and had to move the sign she'd tossed there. She picked it up again, turned it over to look at it lovingly as if it were a portrait. "Do It Now," she mused. How the words typified everything that Barry was—vigorous, stimulating, excitingly abrupt! His tall, lean body shelled a restless spirit that always was alert to new ideas, eager to act on them. That's what made him such a good publisher—his quickness and sureness. That's what made him so exciting to a girl in love.

Two months ago she had tremulously visited his office with the first chapter of her new book. Not that she was particularly wrapped up in the writing of it or anxious to finish it. She had already spent a good six months on the outline. No, it wasn't her eagerness to see the book published that took her in with the one chapter. It was her desperate wanting to see Barry, to bask in his handsome, stimulating presence, to listen to his deep, thrilling voice.

And for the first time since she had known him, he showed a real, alive interest in her—not merely as another author, or as a naive little girl who had stumbled willy-nilly into a best-seller bonanza on her first novel. He was interested in her for herself. She could feel it in the way his blue-gray eyes lit with intense eagerness as he looked up at her from the reading of her script.

"I can't believe it!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Honestly, Lucinda, I never thought you'd get around to turning this out!" He raised a deprecating hand. "Oh, I was impressed with the outline each time you brought it in, but here you've really got down to business!"

Cindy responded like a helpless puppet to the excited approval that shone in his eyes. She was on her feet leaning toward him across his desk, her heart pounding like a tom-tom.

"You wait, Barry! You'll see!" she said breathlessly. "It's in the works now

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and I'm all steamed up to 'do it now!' "

Then he was around the desk and his strong hands were on her shoulders. His face bent way down until it was only a few inches away from hers. "Lucinda Fellows," he said with low intensity, "I'm just beginning to realize what dynamite is wrapped up in that neat little package! You finish this book by fall, and— What a team we'd make!"

Then his lips crushed hers in a sense-reeling kiss that was the tender, earthy reality of every wistful dream she'd had about Barry. His kiss promised a lifetime of excitement and urgent love, and it was a dedication, too—the fulfillment of these promises after she'd proven herself to him.

Even where his heart was concerned, Barry wisely made first things come first. In this case, the first thing to be done was the writing of her book.

AND SO THAT she avoid the distractions of two roommates who shared her New York apartment, Barry encouraged her to rent the remodeled house in Vermont for the summer. The ad had sounded perfect:

Quiet, secluded, completely furnished, remodeled farmhouse in the heart of the Green Mountains. Six small rooms, running water, completely electrified. Ideal for artist or writer.

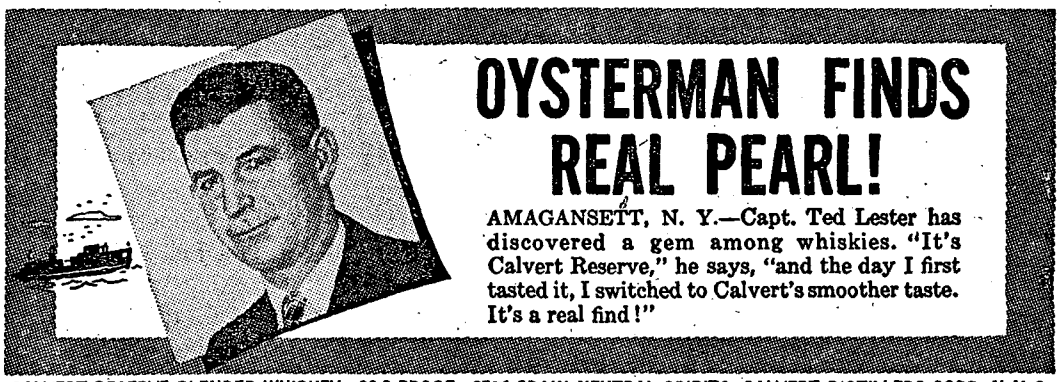
If only she'd known! The ad hadn't mentioned that the furnishings were bare and the "writer" would have to take precious time off to decorate the place. Or that the seclusion invited claustrophobia. Or that the electrical service—and everything run by electricity—was operated according to the whims of the local power company. A rumor of a thunderstorm, and the power was cut off.

Cindy fell asleep with a deep disturbing fear that some strong intangible force was working against her desperate efforts to get something done on time for the first time in her life.

And the next morning she was sure of it! She was aroused by the never-ending bickering of birds and her head felt cottony from the stuffy heat in the room. She had forgotten to open the window and, for the first time in a month, the morning was actually hot and humid.

She stumbled into the kitchen feeling as if she hadn't slept at all. A splash of cold spring water fresh from the rusty tap helped some, and she absently switched on the hotplate for coffee. Then she opened the refrigerator for the milk—and water from the melted freeze compartment dripped dismally out onto the floor. Then she remembered! The power was off again.

She slammed the icebox door shut, feeling the tears close beneath her lids. She'd drive to the village drugstore for break-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fast and stop at the power company on the way back. She just couldn't cope with a series of set-backs this morning!

But the forces of frustration weren't through with her. The car refused to start. All the savage pummelling in the world wouldn't bring more than a click from the starter.

Her eyes felt hot as she looked down the lane toward the mountain road. And then the tears came, scalding, bitter tears. She hated the hot, sultry smell of growing hay and the lush green of the towering hills and the warm breeze that riffled her short brown hair. She hated the very thought of the manuscript lying limply on the card table in the house!

She wished she could walk back into Barry White's neat, air-conditioned office in the center of efficient, convenient New York. She wished that Barry would take her, tired and exhausted, into his strong arms and tell her he understood how hard she had tried.

But here she was, stuck on this mountainside. And what was she supposed to do now—go out on the road and thumb a ride? She dug the backs of her hands into her stinging eyes and looked unhappily down the road.

IT WAS then that a spot of gleaming white nestling between two groves of trees down the mountain reminded her of Don Curtis. Oh, no! She couldn't ask him for help! She couldn't encourage this neighborliness. But his was the only house within walking distance. For the hundreth time she rebelled at her voluntary exile.

Her back was damp with perspiration and her white peasant blouse was sticking to her when she reached the house. She found Don looking disreputable but cool and comfortable in an old shirt and slacks, dabbing at a splotched canvas in the shade of a mammoth elm.

"Hi," he said, grinning lazily. "You caught me at a bad moment. This doesn't look like much, does it?" He stepped back from his painting to cock a critical head at it. "Guess I've done this view from this spot a hundred times. It always changes. It's a fact." He turned back toward her and wiggled a brush at her. "No matter how many times you look at something in this mountain, you can't count on it's not changing before you raise your head again."

For a moment, she was so surprised at the masterful work on the canvas that she forgot her exhaustion and her determination to remain on distant, cool terms with him.

"But you—you said you were a handyman!" she stammered. "I didn't know you—" she gestured toward his canvas.

"Why, I am a handyman," he said, shrugging. "My painting doesn't bring me much. Oh, some of my winter settings sell for Christmas cards and sometimes there are cash prizes, but—"

"Prizes!" she sank down on the grass partly from exhaustion but mostly from amazement. "But if you can sell your paintings, why not just do enough of them and you wouldn't have to do odd jobs!"

His brow wrinkled in mock horror. "And take all the fun out of painting? I don't mind doing odd jobs. In fact, I like that, too. You get to see your neighbors more often." He chucked his paint brush in a tray and sat down beside her. "Odd jobs fill the palette for my painting," he said. "Someday, maybe somebody will discover my stuff and I'll get fat and famous." He looked around the countryside, at the hills that surrounded his home. "In the meantime, I've got to have time for living, too."

She found herself drawn into his dreamy mood, and she, too, followed his eyes around the hills, bursting with life. It *was* lovely, and peaceful, too. And then she caught his eyes on her—inquiring and—yes, amused. Her guard flew

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up. "That's all very fine if you don't have something more important to do," she answered, "but—"

"But you're so busy, I know," he finished for her. "Me, I've just decided it's too hot to paint today. Let's go out to the lake—that is, if you aren't too busy."

She bridled at the challenge. "As a matter of fact," she said crisply, "I came down to ask you to drive me to the village." Then she told him about the power and her car.

His lazy grin deepened on his tan face. "Think of that cool, clear lake water fed by icy, submerged springs."

In her hot, tired state she just couldn't help liking the idea. "Oh, no," she said slowly, "I couldn't. I—"

"—And a soft, cotton blanket spread under a maple tree."

The thought was as soothing as baby powder. She did a quick rationalizing job on herself. As Don said, it was too hot to work, really, to do one's best. It would be afternoon before the power company got themselves up to look over her electric problem and meanwhile she had nothing to eat in the house. The garagemen, typical Vermonters, would take their own sweet time in getting up to take care of her car.

"Will—will we be back before the post office closes?" she asked, the nagging, guilty feeling compelling her to resist if she could. She wanted to be sure not to miss a possible letter from Barry.

His face lighted triumphantly. He shrugged. "Who knows?" And he pulled her to her feet as easily as he'd lift a paint brush.

THE LAKE was as cool and clear as Don promised and gradually, under the lazy spell, Cindy shed the last traces of guilt from staying away from her work; she was here and she might as well enjoy it. The relaxation would help her work better later.

After a short, brisk swim to the float and back to the grassy banks, they strolled up into a clearing. As she stretched on the cotton blanket under the big maple, she felt all the tension drain from her tired limbs.

Don sat beside her with his arms folded across his knees, letting sun-splashes make leaf patterns on his deeply tanned back. He sighed luxuriously. "This is it!"

Even the sound of his voice made her feel relaxed. She turned her head to look at him, the way his lean, muscled back rose magnificantly from his battered, brown G.I. shorts. In a way, it was too bad she didn't have time to make friends with him, she thought. He was a very comfortable person to have around.

He turned his lake-tousled red head around suddenly, catching her contemplating him. "What are you thinking, Cindy?" he asked softly; and before she could answer he flipped around so that he was lying on his stomach next to her, his face close to hers. "Maybe you're thinking the same thing I am—that we seem to hit a fine note on a beautiful summer day."

She flushed, because in a way that was exactly what she'd been thinking. And before she knew it his head was hovering above hers and his lips touched hers, firm, gentle and cool. It was not like any kiss she had ever known. It was more like a gentle greeting of their inner selves meeting for the first time.

His lips rested softly on hers that way for a long moment and, though she had a flashing thought that she ought to resist, she allowed his lips to linger. It was as if she were gently tangled in a spell—a spell she knew would vanish and that she wanted to hold on to long as she could.

When they drew apart she kept her eyes closed dreamily and Don's voice came to her, soft and far away:

"What a life we could lead! We'd have

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the mountains and the lake for our whole world, and the moonlight for a lamp to study it by, at night. If the outside world wanted to make us rich, we'd make them come to the mountains after us! I'd paint when I felt like it, and you'd write when you felt like it—"

Her eyes flew open. The moment, the spell shattered like the bursting of a soap bubble. Don's mention of her writing had done it! The guilty feeling washed over her like a great tidal wave and all her rationalizing was drowned out. What was she doing here, lying around as if she weren't far behind in her schedule! What had she been thinking of to let Don kiss her when Barry was the only man in the world for her?

SHE SAT up swiftly and reached for her bathing cap. "It sounds fine," she said tartly, "but you left out a few unromantic details. For instance, my car gets stalled. And I've got a deadline to meet on my book." She leaped to her feet. "I have to go back to work now."

She could see him stiffen slightly as he stood up beside her. "But the day's just started," he protested. "We could go canoeing, and then we could go for a turn at the barn dance tonight."

She smiled before he'd have a chance to find her amusing. "I'm sorry, Don. But I really have an awful lot to get done, and I shouldn't have gone loafing like this."

"Well, okay," he said reluctantly. He got to his feet and gathered up the blanket, not looking at her.

And when they reached her house, reality hit her with a solid jolt. She opened the door to see a long white oblong letter that had been slipped beneath it. At first she thought it might be a bill for her car, but her heart leaped to her throat when she saw the special delivery from New York. It was from Barry!

The envelope in her fingers brought Barry's quick, stimulating presence so close that Cindy looked at Don as if he were a complete stranger—which he nearly was!

"Well, thanks for the swim, Don," she said almost curtly.

But his momentary seriousness had disappeared and her manner seemed only to amuse him. "Sure you wouldn't like to go to the barn dance tonight?"

She bridled again at his dangling temptation before her. But she was yearning to get into the house and read Barry's letter. It burned her fingers like a smoldering match. Somehow she knew that the letter was important.

"Good-by," she said firmly, and she closed the door and ripped open the letter. It read:

Dear Lucinda,

If possible can you find me a room at a local inn for next week-end? Haven't heard from you for so long, feel that I should come up and see how work is progressing. Know you're hard at it, and if I'd be in the way don't hesitate to say so. Am looking forward to seeing you. Regards.

Barry.

That was all, but the few words had so much meaning between them that her heart spun dizzily. Barry would be here for the whole week-end! He'd actually missed hearing from her! He respected her work enough not to want to interfere. He had faith in her, and he was looking forward to seeing her!

IT WAS too much to think about all at once and she read and re-read the note a dozen times before she realized what she would have to accomplish between now and Saturday. In five days she had to get enough done on the book for Barry to know she had been doing first things

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first, that she justified his faith in her.

Now she resented more than ever the time she had taken to decorate the house with chintzes and new coverings. True, it looked like a little dream now, but how much more impressed Barry would be if she were further along with her book. And today, with Don! She could have kicked herself for wasting today as she had. Of all the weak moments in her life, today had topped them all.

The week flew. There were times when she thought if she wrote another word, she'd throw the whole script out the window. But for Barry—for Barry's love—it was a small price. And she drove on until her eyes ached with the long hours of close work and her back ached with bending over the card-table desk.

And Don Curtis kept intruding until, finally, she had to trick him. She'd hear his battered car sputtering up the road toward her house long before he got there, and the warning gave her time to go into her bedroom. She would wait there until he would knock a few times and leave, thinking she wasn't at home. She didn't know why, but she was almost afraid to see him. Since the morning at the lake she had shut him completely from her thoughts.

And then, on Saturday, just as dusk was settling over the mountain, Barry was there. His car whisked into the lane and he hopped out, as trim and cool as if he'd just arrived at his office before a day's work.

Her heart pounded unreasonably as he strode toward her. She thought for one wild moment that he was going to kiss her, but he only put his hands on her shoulders with a slight hug.

"How are you, Lucinda?" he asked.

She smiled up at him breathlessly. "Fine, Barry, fine. My, it's good to see you. Come in!" And she took his hand to lead him into the house.

He sat in the wing chair and looked around the room. "Bet you'll be glad to get away from the rural life and back to New York," he exclaimed as his eyes rested on the straight, rickety chair on which she perched, and the card table she had been using for a desk.

"Yes," she admitted. "Yes, I will."

HIS MOUTH twisted with frank distaste as he eyed the copper kettle and chintzes. "This quaint stuff," he said. "You've done well to work in this atmosphere, Lucinda. Really it's so darned unbusinesslike. Not at all what I pictured when I suggested you work in the country."

She looked sadly at the copper kettle she had polished so bright, only to earn his disapproval. He was right, of course. It was unbusinesslike! But she had thought it rather pretty—certainly prettier than it had been with ages of black tarnish. Somehow, his remark jarred her.

Well, she hadn't expected that Barry would especially like the house. What she was eager to show him was the seven completed chapters of her book. She had slaved to finish the seventh the night before and she could hardly wait to see the approval shine in his eyes.

As soon as she gracefully could she pulled out the pile of neatly clipped pages. "Well," she said brightly. "Here is is! Seven chapters!"

His quick grin was soothing balm to her tired nerves. "Lucinda, you really amaze me!" He was on his feet and by her side in an instant. "I'll take these along with me tonight to read at the Inn." He was quiet for a minute and she looked up to see his eyes warm and alive, resting on her. "Lucinda," he said softly, "I'm proud of you! I think you're really going to finish this thing before fall!"

"Oh," she said quickly, "but you haven't read it yet. Maybe you won't like it—"

His hands were on her shoulders and

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he was drawing her to him. She felt herself responding to the promise that fired his eyes. "When your work's done, Lucinda—"

A loud knock at the door made her spin to see Don Curtis standing there, eyeing them casually. "I'm sorry to interrupt," he said with more amusement than apology. "I was walking by, Cindy, and—"

"Oh, Don!" Cindy's exclamation was full of exasperation. Her heart rebelled at this last intrusion on her privacy. "This—this is my publisher, Mr. White. Barry, this is a neighbor of mine, Mr. Curtis." She could have dropped through the floor. Not that she cared about Don's seeing her in Barry's arms. After all, Don didn't mean anything at all to her. It was just so embarrassing all around.

"Well," Don said, grinning lazily. "I guess you're going to be extra busy tonight, Cindy. I'll see you." He stopped at the door a second, his eyes twinkling. "If you need me for anything, odd jobs or otherwise, just let me know." Then he disappeared into the heavy dusk, whistling.

Something was shattered in the air between Cindy and Barry. She looked up to find angry sparks in his eyes. Her breath caught in her throat. Why, Barry was actually jealous!

"And just who is that?" Barry demanded. "And what did he mean by that crack?"

"Oh, he—he just likes to be neighborly," Cindy stammered. "He does odd jobs around the village."

BARRY RAISED a displeased eyebrow. "For an odd-job man, he certainly acted on familiar terms with you. Doesn't he know his place?"

Something stirred in her in defense of Don. "He's more a neighbor than an odd-job man," she said. "Anyhow, he's really an artist. He's won prizes."

Barry's eyebrow descended slowly and his eyes narrowed. "If he were an artist," he said, his voice tinged with sarcasm, "he'd be painting, not doing odd jobs and paying social calls. An artist has to produce and keep producing, Cindy, or he isn't an artist. You know that."

She didn't want to but she was prodded to champion Don. "He doesn't believe in production all the time," she said. "It doesn't fit in with his way of life. He's just naturally friendly, that's—"

"You seem to know quite a lot about this handy-man," Barry observed caustically. "I hope his laxity didn't affect your own work. What you call his 'way of life' can be catching, and damaging."

She felt herself trembling now, as she thought of the really exhausting five days and evenings she had spent on the book, just to catch up to her schedule, to make Barry proud of her. Suddenly she was quite angry with him.

"Don believes in friendliness," she said, matching Barry's caustic tones. "Is there something so terribly wrong in that?"

He eyed her levelly. "Of course not. In its place, and if it doesn't interfere with things that must come first, friendship can be wonderful." His stiff tones softened in the moment it took him to smile briefly. "That's why I've been holding off on things between us, Lucinda, don't you see?"

His explanation, coupled with a contrite expression, failed to assure her, somehow. Something had ruined the evening, between them, something that couldn't be recaptured if she kept trembling with anger this way. She turned her back to him, quickly, afraid that angry tears might come.

"You're tired," he said behind her. "I'm sorry I upset you." He patted her shoulder. "Tell you what," he said with forced enthusiasm. "I'll go back to the Inn, and make a few phone calls. Then I'll come back later, and we'll talk it all

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over—if that's all right with you."

She nodded quickly. She heard the door briskly open and close. And then she heard the smooth purr of his car starting, then the grate of scattering gravel as he swept down the lane. She stood still for a long moment afterward, too, running her fingers along the edge of her manuscript. This wasn't at all the way she'd dreamed of Barry's visit! And she felt bitterly let-down. Barry, who had always been so stimulating and exciting, had only succeeded in making her feel more depressed than she had ever felt in these weeks of hard work!

She tried to cast away her anger by opening the folder of her novel and concentrating on the words, but it didn't help. The words sounded unreal, forced and without meaning. All the effort that had gone into them seemed wasted now. They were stiff, stilted words, not her own, real self. She had worked so hard over every little word to win Barry's love—and now it all seemed so empty and futile! It was maddening!

Furious, she picked up the cardboard folder and hurled it, as hard as she could, at the lamp on the card-table. The lamp toppled over and crashed, leaving the room completedly blackened.

She sat perfectly still for a moment, breathing quickly, trying to let the anger boil away. But the anger was mixed with hurt and bewilderment, and it stayed locked inside her, simmering with unbearable intensity.

FINALLY, when she couldn't stand it any longer, she flung open the front door and stepped out into the yard. She stood on the grass with her eyes tight shut, filling her lungs with the cool evening air. Far off, against the chorus of crickets, a bird twittered sleepily. She opened her stinging eyes and they were soothed by the deep, purple shadows that were gradually blanketing the mountain.

She put her hand to her forehead in puzzlement, wondering what made her feel so released. And she found the answer in something Don had said once:

"No matter how many times you look at something in this mountain, you can't count on it's not changing before you raise your head again."

She felt released because she now saw Barry in his true light—something she might not have found out for a long, hurtful time in the city. She felt grateful to the mountain.

Then she heard the familiar rattle of Don's jalopy, charging up the mountain road and, with the sudden leap her heart took, she knew the real reason.

Don, in his easy-going way, had taken possession of her heart. The wariness she'd felt with him from the start had only been fear of herself—of her own, true self! She had been bound to Barry's nervous, energetic personality by artificial bonds. But the bonds had been drawn too tight until she had to burst free.

Her heart pounded against her ribs when Don's car stopped in front of the house and he turned the motor off. He strode toward her and in the brightening moonlight she could see his face tight with worry.

His real concern for her left no doubt in her mind as to how he felt toward her. She knew then that every temptation to relax he'd placed before her had been his own, unaggressive way of trying to win her love.

"I saw your friend drive down the mountain, and then your light went out—so early," he said. "I was hoping—" he hesitated. "I was wondering if I could help."

"Oh yes, Don, you can help!" she said in low, vibrant tones. "You can help me make up for all this time I've wasted!"

They went into each others arms then, and their kiss told them everything each other had to know.

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Hired Handful

By
BILL SEVERN

A man who has been hired to make love to a girl should not mix business with pleasure.

THERE WERE a dozen girls around the stage door as Steve came out, but they looked away after a quick glance at him. He was strictly nobody to the kids, hopefully waiting for an autograph from the sleepy-voiced troubadour who starred in the show. As Steve grinned and turned toward the avenue, the girl who stepped in front of him said, "I beg your pardon."

She had dark hair and big eyes, a warmly beautiful mouth and everything to match. There was nothing about her to beg his pardon. Glancing down, Steve saw the autograph book in her hand. "You've got the wrong guy." He nodded to the stage door. "Dreamboat's still on his way."

"I don't want him." She smiled. "You are an actor, aren't you?"

Frowning slightly, Steve admitted it. He made a further study and recovered his grin. She definitely didn't belong among the squeal contingent. Her socks weren't short; they were well-filled nylons. And she seemed to be in her elderly teens, probably only a few years less ancient than he was at twenty-three.

"Can we go someplace and talk?" she asked.

Steve took her arm, deciding any answer to that would be completely unnecessary. There was a drugstore near the corner. "Let's go in here," she said. She tucked the autograph book into her purse and told him, just as though it explained everything, "I had to have some excuse. Besides, I didn't know whether I could get up the nerve to go through with this."

"Oh?" Steve led her to one of the booths at the side of the fountain. She didn't look like a girl who would talk in riddles. She didn't look anything but more beautiful in the full light of the drugstore.

"I suppose this is a wild idea, but—" She hesitated and her cheeks flushed faintly. "It seemed sensible when I thought of it. I mean, if you want a sink fixed, you get a plumber. If you want some acting done, you get an actor, don't you?"

"Of course." Steve sat back, wondering.

"I'm Marilyn Terry."

"Steve O'Brien."

"What I'm trying to say, Steve—" Marilyn halted once more. "I've got a job for an actor. I mean—" She shook her head. "Maybe I'd better tell you first about Fred."

THE WAY she said the name, the catch in her voice that came with it, made Steve decide he wasn't going to like Fred. But he listened. It seemed Fred owned the jewelry store where Marilyn was employed and he was really in love with Marilyn, but it had been like that for almost a year and Fred never quite got around to asking her to marry him. And then, this other girl, Irene, had come along

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"When I take a girl out, she doesn't have to pay me to hold hands with her," Steve said angrily.

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to throw herself at Fred. "I guess it's my fault," Marilyn went on. "I wasn't clever. But I know Fred wants me. All he needs is a little shove in the right direction."

"Believe me, honey," Steve interrupted, "any man who needs a shove in your direction isn't worth having."

"You don't understand." She didn't smile. "Irene's not going to take him from me." She gripped the table, leaning forward. "I've been too honest with Fred, letting him see how I feel. A woman never should be that honest. Irene's taught me that much. What I have to do is keep him guessing, make him jealous." She looked up. "I can put on as good a show as she can."

"And that's where I come in?" Steve asked.

"I want to hire you." She nodded. "Irene's giving a party tomorrow night. I want you to take me and act as though—well, just make Fred jealous. You don't have a performance Sunday, do you? I'll pay you. I didn't want to go to one of the theatrical agencies for somebody."

Steve stared at her a second, his frown deepening. It wasn't a gag; she seemed serious. "A girl like you doesn't know any fellows who'd take her to a party?"

"But that's the point, don't you see? I couldn't use anybody I know. It wouldn't be fair to play up to some boy just so Fred could see us. This way, it's simply a business arrangement." Marilyn picked up her purse. "We can settle it now. How much will it cost me? Say about four hours."

"I'm afraid not." Steve didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. He felt like taking her by the shoulders and shaking sense into her. "I've done a lot of things in the name of acting," he said slowly. "I've been everything from a horse to a ghost's uncle. But a guy has to draw the line somewhere."

"Well, I don't see why—"

"Because I'm not a gigolo, that's why," he cut her off. "Because when I take a girl out, she doesn't pay me by the hour to hold hands with her. Because—" He took a deep breath. "If you want my advice, let Irene have Fred. He's not for you if you have to trick him into loving you."

"I didn't ask for advice." She got up. "I'm sorry. I'll find someone else to help me."

STEVE WATCHED her as she strode to the door, the set of her shoulders and the determined lift of her chin. Marilyn probably would get somebody else. And maybe she would walk into the kind of trouble she didn't expect, trying to carry out this wild idea. The sort of a man who would take her money might get ideas of his own. The crazy kid, she was asking for almost anything with a deal like this.

"Wait a minute." Steve hurried after her to the street. Marilyn turned and he said, "I'll take you to the party."

"You don't have to do me any favors." She sounded angry now. "How much?"

"I guess you're right. It's just a job. I shouldn't be so proud." He found his grin. "Well, fifty bucks might cover it. Of course, if you want me to buy you flowers—"

"You'll get twenty-five." She opened her purse. "That's plenty." Marilyn counted it out and handed him a card. "There's my address. I'll expect you a little before eight."

"The union won't like this." Steve glanced at the bills. "How do you know you can trust me? Don't you want a receipt?"

"I'll have to trust you." Her eyes met his an instant and she finally smiled. "Please, Steve." Marilyn put her hand on his arm. "Don't let me down."

"I've never missed a curtain," Steve told her. His grin lasted until she was

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lost among the crowd on the avenue. Looking at the bills again then, he folded them and shook his head. Thinking of Fred and what he had agreed to do, he wasn't happy.

Steve bought flowers. An orchid for her to wear and a dozen roses for her to have. He rang the apartment bell early, holding down the excitement that quickened in him at the sight of Marilyn in a strapless white gown, reminding himself that this wasn't for him. She wanted Fred and he had promised to help her.

Marilyn took the flowers. "Steve, they're lovely." She looked up. "But you shouldn't have—"

"Don't worry," he told her. "It's all paid for in advance." She was lovely, so very lovely. Her dark hair against her shoulders, the touch of lace at her throat that somehow made the breath-holding sweep of her gown almost demure, the cool white satin bringing out the full warmth of her coloring. Steve pulled his eyes away. He glanced at his watch. "Four hours," he said. "We'll count it from now."

Her smile faded. "Yes, of course." Marilyn crossed the apartment. "But I don't think we should leave yet. Nobody will be there. Would you like a drink?"

"Whatever you say." Steve shrugged. "Do you want me to be in love with you or just attentive?"

Marilyn turned. "What?"

"Tonight. How far shall I go? If you tell Fred you've just met me, I don't want to put on too much of an act."

"Oh." She lifted two glasses from the cabinet. "Well, I guess you'd better be an old friend from back home—a fellow I used to know. We went together when we were in school and we happened to meet again at that drugstore near your theater. How does that sound?"

"I wouldn't go for it," Steve said. "But maybe he will." He went over and took the drink she had made. "Where's home? California? Texas? Idaho?"

"Ohio," she told him. "It's a little town. Oak Hills. I've been here in the city two years. I suppose you should know that. And, let's see, you were on the football team. I did go with a boy who was."

"Basketball," Steve said. "It was Pennsylvania. But a small town, too. It's close enough. There was a girl like you."

No, not like her, he thought. Not any of them since. But she could have been a girl he had known back home; Marilyn belonged more to everything he remembered of that than the girls he had met here. A home-town kid would try something as naive as this, thinking she was sophisticated and worldly wise.

THEY SAT with their drinks and talked about her town and his, the school dances and the picnics at the lake in summer, skating and swimming and Saturday night movies, the whole family going to church on Sunday and the neighbors they might have shared.

And they talked of the things that were different, too. Steve's struggle to make good in the theater, his luck breaking into radio, so that now he was sure of something even between shows; Marilyn's understanding in her own hope of being an actress and her trading that ambition for the jobs that had paid the rent on small apartments like this.

Steve couldn't blame her for wanting the security a marriage to Fred would give her. It would be easy for a girl to convince herself she was in love with a man who could provide her with that. And maybe she was in love. He didn't know Fred. He had no right to judge. Steve glanced at the square clock on the table and saw it was after nine. They had been talking more than an hour, growing up together, forgetting Fred.

Marilyn followed his glance and she saw the clock, too. "Oh, goodness." She

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got up quickly. "We'd better hurry."

"I won't count this." Steve grinned. "You've got an extra hour coming to you."

"Thanks." Marilyn smiled. "Anyhow, we are friends now. I mean—it won't be so hard to pretend. We—"

"Sure," he said, taking her arm. "I can almost believe it, myself."

Fred wasn't what Steve expected. There was nothing too smooth, too handsome about him. Just a friendly, average, easy-mannered individual without any particular high-pressured charm. Steve found himself liking Fred. Irene was nice, too. She hardly matched the description Marilyn had given him of the glamorous *femme fatale*. If Irene had claws, they didn't show.

WATCHING Fred and Irene at the party, Steve felt sorry for Marilyn. Her viewpoint was distorted by her own wishful thinking. Maybe Fred had made a play for Marilyn before he had met Irene, but Steve was convinced Irene hadn't stolen him from her. If Steve had ever seen a couple in love, Fred and Irene were. It was obvious in the touch of their hands, their glances, the secret-trading smiles that went between them. Marilyn was wasting her time if she thought she could make Fred jealous. Fred didn't know she was in the room.

Dancing with Marilyn, Steve wanted to say it. He wanted to tell her, "Fred was never yours to lose or Irene's to win. He made his own choice. It's tough to face, but you'll have to." And he felt like adding, "You'll get over it. You're not really in love with Fred. It's your pride, more than anything. That and the fact that marrying him would have given you the security every girl wants from marriage."

But he couldn't say it, of course. Holding her close, wishing his arms could protect her from the truth he knew and she wouldn't admit, he had to go on with the act she expected. Marilyn wanted only the pretense; she didn't want Fred.

She was soft and sweet and warmly alive in his arms, so excitingly beautiful, so terribly young and vulnerable. Marilyn looked up at him with a smile that was make-believe and Steve's heart caught on it. For a minute, he couldn't grin. He couldn't play out this hopeless charade for Fred.

Steve stopped dancing. He let his arms fall away from her. "Can I get you a drink, Marilyn?"

"Thanks, darling." She made the smile bigger. Whispering, she said, "Don't be so formal, Steve." Marilyn's laughter for the others was as forced as her smile. "Fred's looking at us right now."

"Sorry." Steve glanced across the room and saw Fred looking at Irene. Couldn't Marilyn see that? She was fooling herself, being blind to what was there, because she didn't want to see.

Marilyn slipped her fingers into his. She went with him to the small kitchen to help mix the drinks. As the door swung behind them, she sighed and shook her head. "Can't you do better than that? You're not even trying, Steve. No wonder Fred isn't jealous. You act more like a big brother than—" She broke off the words abruptly. Before Steve realized what was happening, Marilyn was in his arms, holding him, kissing him.

But her lips barely brushed his and Steve had no chance to make anything more of it. She backed away as suddenly, turning to face someone who had come through the doorway behind them. She obviously had expected Fred to follow her, to find her like this and be furious.

It wasn't Fred. Irene stood there, looking amused. "I thought maybe you couldn't find what you wanted," she said, her smile going from Marilyn to Steve. "But I guess you have." She winked to Marilyn. "I'm glad." Irene stepped out

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of the kitchen again, closing the door.

STEVE FELT a quick anger lift in his pulses, but it changed to a sympathy for Marilyn that somehow was just as angry as he saw the hurt disappointment of her expression. She glanced down, shaking her head. "I guess it wasn't such a bright idea," Marilyn said quietly.

"I'm taking you home," Steve told her.

"But we can't leave now. Fred will wonder—"

"My time's up, Marilyn," he cut her off. "The show's over."

"Please. I'll pay you the difference."

His fingers clenched as he felt the slap of the words. For an instant, he was afraid to look at her, afraid of what he might say and do. "If you want to stay here alone and make more of a fool of yourself than you have, that's up to you."

"Steve!"

He shoved open the door. "Come on, Marilyn. Smile." Steve took her arm. "That's the way to do it. Always leave them smiling."

In the elevator, after they had thanked Irene and said good night to the others, Marilyn said, "I didn't think you'd walk out on me like this, Steve." He didn't answer. In the cab, she sat as far over on the seat as she could get. The meter ticked loudly in the silence between them. "Just because I kissed you?" she asked finally. "You're angry about that?"

The taxi stopped and he helped her out. He paid the driver and kept the wallet in his hand as he took Marilyn to the apartment entrance. He pulled out the money she had given him, the bills folded separately under the flap of his wallet. "Here."

She raised her head slowly. "I don't want this back."

"You didn't think I'd take it, did you?" he asked.

"But I don't understand. You agreed to—"

"I had to play it your way," he interrupted. "You needed a man for the part. The trouble is, you never had any show." Steve held her arms. "Forget it, Marilyn. You wouldn't understand if I told you." He drew her close. He kissed her and his arms ached with wanting her, with knowing she wanted Fred. He let her go and made her a grin. "Sorry. I guess that wasn't in the script, was it?"

He turned and walked away fast, his head down as he crossed the street. He didn't look back. There was no use in looking back.

He didn't intend to go past the store where she worked Monday afternoon. He had put Marilyn from his mind; he had quit thinking about her. He was nothing to her and he knew it and he couldn't go on losing his sleep over something that would never be. He wasn't the kind to go around carrying the torch for some girl he hardly knew and would never see again.

He strolled through the park, looking at the other girls he passed, giving his grin to a few and getting a few smiles in return. Marilyn could have been any of them. It really amounted to no more than that. Convincing himself he could pick up a girl as pretty and have a date as casual if he felt in the mood, he wandered down the avenue. A man on the town, enjoying the bright spring afternoon, without any particular direction to his walk.

AND THEN, he came to the end of the block and saw the sign above the shop. He halted there and stopped lying to himself. It wasn't coincidence that had brought him this way, in the hope of merely seeing Marilyn again. He stood a minute, arguing with himself, debating, knowing that even without Fred, she wouldn't be interested in him. Even if she liked him, instead of feeling as she must after last night, what had he to offer? A second-rate actor, still trying to make the grade. Marilyn understood what that life

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was. She had given up her own theatrical ambitions for the security of a steady job. She would want an even greater security in the man she married.

He called himself a romantic fool and turned the corner to go on across town. But the side-street buildings suddenly seemed to shut out the sun and there was no warmth left in the late spring day. Steve didn't grin at the girls he passed or see whether they might have smiled. None of them was Marilyn.

The kids with their autograph books were around the stage door, waiting as usual, when Steve left the theater after the show that night. Someday, maybe, they would stand out there for him, but she wouldn't be among them. He pushed through the group now, Mr. Nobody in a hurry, quickly glanced at and ignored as the youngsters resumed their vigil.

"Steve."

He swung around, not believing the voice he heard. Marilyn stood where she had been standing Saturday night, the street light full on her face a moment, showing him her smile. It was as though it were all happening again.

"I know I'm a nuisance," she said. "But, Steve, I have to talk to you."

There was so much he wanted to say, he couldn't speak. His grin broke wide as he took her arm and he felt the gladness come like a glow inside him, a hope that brushed away the questions. It was enough that she was here. "Drugstore okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Fine."

They sat at the same booth and Steve ordered coffee and Marilyn said, "There's no reason why you should do me a favor." She glanced down. "I guess I have a nerve to ask. But if you haven't anything better to do, would you take me dancing? Just about an hour, Steve."

All the little bubbles went flat as the excitement drained out of him. "Another party?"

"No." Her eyes didn't meet his. "It's a club on Fifty-third Street."

"Fred will be there with Irene?" It wasn't a question. He knew the answer. "You want them to see us together again?"

"Will you?" Marilyn put her hand over his. "We don't need to stay long."

At least, she hadn't offered to pay him. She wasn't trying to hire him. She thought he could help her. It wouldn't do her any good with Fred; it wouldn't do Steve any good with her. But he said, "All right, Marilyn. I'll take you."

THE CLUB was small and unimpressive, a duplicate of half a dozen others along the street, soft lights and loud music. There weren't many Monday night visitors. Steve and Marilyn had it mostly to themselves. "Fred won't miss us in the crowd, that's sure," Steve told her.

Marilyn moved back her chair a little. "I'd like to dance, Steve."

It wasn't easy to dance with her, to have her in his arms and know it was only because she wanted something to do until Fred came along. Marilyn didn't make it any easier, holding that close to him, smiling up at him as the band mocked them with a love song. She couldn't guess what she was doing to him. It was all in him.

He shut his eyes and he could feel her breath against his face, her lips so near, her fingers unconsciously tightening in his as the rhythm quickened to the drums that seemed to pound in him, lifting to the faster tempo of the trumpets, carrying Marilyn away with him. And then, softer once more, a muted melody, but still the drums.

He realized the music had stopped. Looking down, he saw that her eyes were closed. She was smiling, dreaming, wishing. But not for him. "Shall we go back to the table?" he asked.

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Silent Prayer

Let him be gentle,
Let him be true—
Don't let him turn
To somebody new!
Let him be faithful,
Let him be fond
Till the end of time
And a bit beyond.

Though "Love," he sang,
"Is a flower that dies,
To bloom anew
In another's eyes,"
Let me keep his wandering
Glance in check,
Or else let him go—
Go break his neck!

—Carol Hunt

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By NANCY SEALE

Three Day Deadline

The tricks of Kelly's trade were no match for the schemes of a girl like Jane.

WITH something close to fury, Jane Torbett snatched up the letter which lay unfolded on her neat, modern desk. Then she stood up. She was a tall, lovely girl with heavily lashed eyes of deep ocean blue which glowed now in her anger.

Ordinarily Jane did not allow herself to be disturbed by anything so obscure as a crank correspondent. She was successful enough as a young writer to accept criticism with equanimity. But this, somehow, was different.

She walked with the letter to the window on the other side of her chartreuse-walled studio room and adjusted the Venetian blind to put the maximum amount of light on the offending sheet of stationery. And although half of Hollywood lay before her, shining and washed from a recent rain, she did not pause to admire the view.

"Smug, smog-minded, ego-eyed male!" she said under her breath. A sharp, vertical line marred the classic expanse of her brow as she shook her close-cut, dark hair and looked at the letter again. She read slowly:

My poor, misled Jane Torbett:

Until now I've followed your career with interest, even boasted about the fact that we once shared a senior debating class at University High (I shall omit the date).

Jane stopped, remembering a brash, cocky, high school youth. How she had hated him! First, because she had been a good two inches taller than he—a fact which increased her self-consciousness yet left him undaunted—second, because he had so consistently defeated her in classroom debates.

A fresh surge of anger surprised her with its intensity. That had been fully ten years ago. It was ridiculous to be bothered. She turned back to the letter.

However, I have just finished reading your story, Rachel and the Reporter, *in a current magazine, and find it provides the ideal answer to the question: How wrong can writers get? It is obvious that a cloistered existence has denied you the privilege of meeting the newspaper world even so indirectly as through the person of a real, live reporter, such as the undersigned,*

Kelly J. West.

P.S. In order to give you this glorious opportunity, I have obtained your phone number and will shortly call you.

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It was unfortunate that at this moment the telephone rang. Jane's long, slim fingers lifted the instrument with the quick fury of a cornered Capone hoisting his sawed-off shotgun.

"You blimp-head," she said into the receiver. "You bug-brain! Did it ever occur to you that I might not be interested in the glorious opportunity you offer?"

"Never," said a voice she thought she recognized, and hung up.

Jane sat down at her desk and rolled a sheet of yellow paper into the typewriter. She had been ready to begin writing on a new story when the afternoon mail had come and taken priority over her plot.

"Page One," she typed, in order to be typing something. Then, quite involuntarily, she continued: "And who are you, Mr. K.J.W., to tell *me,* who once put out an entire edition of the University High *Deadline* alone and unassisted that—"

THE DOOR bell buzzed. Jane uncrossed her trim legs and started toward the door. The buzzing of the door was now heard to be accompanied by a cheerful whistle.

She opened the door fast and looked hard at the tall young man in the hall. A gay red and blue plaid tie relieved the severity of his conservative dark suit and blended well with his blue eyes and his face. There was an expectant expression on the face and a carefree look to the wavy, brown hair.

"Miss Torbett?" he asked. She nodded. "Good, then I'll come in."

Jane did not move from the doorway. "I subscribe to a sufficient number of periodicals."

"You'll never write a best-seller if you can't judge character better than that." This time, he did manage to come in and close the door. "Like your place. Nice water color." He nodded approvingly toward a large painting over the couch. "I have a Dufy original myself."

Though the watercolor was her pride, Jane did not unbend. "I'm impressed with your cultural knowledge, not with your manners. Would you consider introducing yourself?"

The young man looked surprised. "Forgive me, Janie. You look the same as ever. Proud and beautiful. I thought you'd recognize me, too."

Jane stared up at him. Yes, she should have known him, if not by his appearance which had lengthened and in other ways also distinctly improved, then by his spirit which seemed unchanged.

He bowed low. "My card."

She took it. She did not have to read it to know that it said, "Kelly J. West." She folded her arms and tilted her smooth, dark head as she looked at him with near-hostility.

"Kelly J. West, three months ago upon acceptance, the editors of *This Month* sent me a check for a story *they* considered convincing." She moved toward the wide, low couch and sat down. "So you can scarcely blame me if I'm uninterested in your criticisms."

"Another victim of the closed mind," Kelly sighed, seating himself on a large, turquoise-colored ottoman.

"No," Jane said, "of the closed door, as long as you're on this side of it."

"Easily adjusted," Kelly said, rising. "I have never been one on whom a large building has to topple before a point is made."

"Good," Jane said. "I do get tired of pushing them over."

"But before I go—" He brought from his inside coat pocket a torn sheet of copy paper.

"—I just happen to have with me an itemized list of the major inconsistencies in your literary distortion of the newspaper world."

"Do you?" she said, her eyes darkening.

"Of course, if you feel unable to furnish rebuttal—"

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She snatched at the paper. Kelly, with effortless timing shifted the list to his other hand.

"Ah-ah-ah! It took me an hour plus a re-reading of your story to compile this list. I distrust your intentions."

She smiled in a superior way. "I doubt if there's anything in it worth destroying."

HE HELD the list at arm's length, glanced at it, but kept amused eyes on Jane as he recited: "A. Reporter rushes in quick succession from murder scene to bank robbery to in-flight interview with record-making pilot."

"Those things happen," she said with composure.

"Not to one reporter. Some of my stories make good reading, but it's my genius in presenting dull facts brightly, not the facts themselves." He bowed slightly, punctuating his statement, and turned back to his memo. "B. Reporter makes more money in poker game than from salary. C. Reporter falls in love with girl—"

"The discrepancy there," Jane broke in, "is that I had the girl fall in love with the reporter!"

"—in three days," Kelly finished, undismayed by her interruption. "Moreover, I'm prepared to furnish proof of the absurdities of all three situations."

There was a slight pause. He folded and replaced the paper, then leaned toward her with a charming if self-assured smile. "Well?"

"What are the terms of your proposal?" Jane asked in a remarkably even and calm tone.

"Just that you follow me around for the next three days, with a notebook. I shall charge you only the minimum fee," he added graciously.

"*Charge* me?"

"Only my traveling expenses: meals, transportation, occasional cigarettes. The information, plus my valuable and revealing comments—they're for free."

Jane gasped. "Really!"

He made a quick wave of his hand. "I can understand your surprise, but I shall accept nothing more. Golden-hearted West, I'm known as."

"If you think I'm going to follow you around, licking your hands like some cowed little canine—"

"Female?" Kelly inquired.

Her glare became, if possible, a trifle more intense. "Wait a minute," she said then, her voice catching up with speeding thoughts. "I've changed my mind."

"For an improved model?" he asked hopefully.

She allowed herself to smile at that, then quickly retreated from the enemy camp. "You, as the saying goes, have asked for it. I shall answer."

"Splendid!" he said. He caught one of Jane's hands in both of his and shook it vigorously. "Just to show my good will, if I'm unable to prove my points, my water color is yours!"

"I'll match it," she said, removing her hand. "When do we start?"

"Seven in the morning at the *Express* office."

"I'll be there," she said, "with a ring through my nose."

She lay across the wide, ivy-colored studio couch which doubled as sleeping quarters and let her finger cruise down the page of the telephone book until it reached the name she had remembered: George Joseph Jowlett, City Editor for the *Express*.

"I'm sorry," a clerk's voice said on the other end of the line, although clearly he wasn't the least regretful, "Mr. Jowlett left orders not to be disturbed."

"But this is important. A matter of pride or death!" Jane slurred the word, pride, and made her tone desperate.

"Well, in that case—" the clerk said reluctantly. Jane held her breath as he buzzed the room, until at last there was an answer.

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GEORGE JOSEPH JOWLETT puffed three times on his aromatic Havana and carefully tapped the ashes into a huge, standing ashtray. He looked across at Jane through heavy-lidded eyes, then opened his large, pouty mouth and spoke. "It's an unusual request, Miss Torbett." He shifted his noticeable weight slightly in one of the dozen leather chairs which furnished the gloomy, high-ceilinged lobby of the Westway Men's Club.

Jane leaned forward, her eyes bright as her cobalt-blue suit, her voice eager. "It would give my story such depth, such verisimilitude!"

Mr. Jowlett brought his furry, red eyebrows closer together. "Hm! Don't know if I should be a party to that sort of thing." He gave a brief chuckle.

Jane acknowledged his humor with a quick smile and hurried on excitedly. "And if it could be arranged for Kelly's assignments to be more important than usual, I'll get better background for my story."

"How does Kelly feel about it?"

She bit her lip. "Mr. Jowlett, I'd rather he didn't know about my part in it."

"Hm." She watched anxiously as he mashed out the cigar. When he looked at her again, his fat lips were curved slightly upward. She supposed he was smiling. "Very well, Miss Torbett. I've a faulty memory, though. Best make a note of it." He reached into several sagging pockets of his huge, shapeless suit. "Hm. No pencil. Well, no matter."

"It's only for three days," she said.

"If either of you last half that time, and if Kelly really gets the assignments," Mr. Jowlett said, easing his ample self out of the chair, "I'll give you your combined weight in linotype machines."

Jane hummed a brief, gay tune to herself, despite the time and despite the place. The hour was not yet seven; the place was the sidewalk in front of the *Express* office building. Standing there, her bright coat wrapped around her trim figure, she looked expectant, happy. She saw Kelly several seconds before he became aware of her. He looked at her with sleepy eyes.

"No one," he said, "has a right to look so cheerful at this time of day, or to wear such a blatant color."

"It's in your honor," she said. "Kelly green. And I can't help smiling at my benefactor."

"You mean because I'm about to unkink your information about the press?"

"I mean because I'll enjoy owning a *pair* of water colors at least twice as much as having a single."

Kelly took her arm and steered her through the door. "Prepare yourself for a third eventuality—a bare, blank wall."

She followed him into the elevator, which opened three stories later on a wide, noisy, loft-like room. An office boy and two copy-readers complimented her entrance with three separate, two-toned whistles. She acknowledged them with three gracious smiles.

"They like my coat," she told Kelly.

"They whistle at dogs, too," Kelly said with a grin. "Stay here while I get my first assignment." And he strode toward the door marked "City Desk."

Twenty minutes later they were driving west on Wilshire Boulevard. The streets looked clean and bare at that hour before the heavy traffic. Even the air smelled fresh and good. Kelly drove without glancing at Jane.

She leaned back against the seat of his untidy Ford coupe. "You still haven't told me where we're going," she reminded him.

He was silent for a minute. "Maybe you'd rather go home," he finally offered. "It's right on the way."

"You're afraid of boring me?"

He spoke between his teeth. "It seems that film star Mona Martell has had enough of Hollywood's thousand dollar a week hardships. She took the popular sleeping pill exit early this morning." He

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looked at Jane suddenly. "Funny, I haven't had an assignment like this for three months."

IT WAS later, much later when Jane unlocked the door to her apartment and waved Kelly ahead of her. He sank into an inviting chair, his long legs spread straight out in front of him, his arms hanging limply over the sides of the chair.

"You're tired," Jane said. "Wait till you drink one of my frosted specialties. You'll revive."

A few minutes later, after he'd drained the first small cocktail glass and poured himself another, he spoke. His voice held both dolor and wonder.

"I've worked for that rag for a year and a half. Some weeks I get one good story, some weeks not. And now, today, the first day you go with me, I get a prominent suicide, quadruplets, and a factory fire!"

"Cheer up, Kelly. Two falls out of three. You still have a chance." She patted his unruly hair and sat down.

"Your sympathy is distinctly out of character, Jane. You arouse my suspicions."

"I'm just being gentlemanly," she said quickly.

"In that case, I'll take advantage of it. Make it two out of the three points on my list of criticisms. There's the poker winning exaggeration and—"

"And?"

"There's love!" He looked at her narrowly. Suddenly he pulled himself together and stood up. "Thanks just the same for the offer of dinner," he said. By his look Jane knew that he knew that *she* knew the way to a man's heart is via a well-stocked ice-box.

She laughed. He looked so hunted, somehow. "Kelly, you oaf, I won't bite you!"

He opened the door. "I know," he said looking at her with distrust. "You're building up my confidence. That's what worries me." With that, he made a swift exit.

It was en route to Kelly's assignment the next day that Jane became uneasy. He looked smug.

"Okay. So yesterday was a big day. Look what's on the schedule now—the music critic is sick, and I cover the Chamber Music Lovers Monthly Matinee. Make something of that, Janie!"

JANE SAT stiffly in the uncomfortable seat in the small auditorium. George Joseph Jowlett and his fish net memory! He should have made a note to look at his notes, she thought. Kelly was nudging her. "Typical Kelly West assignment. This is the sort of stuff I get. And who but Mr. Jowlett would think of it? I bet there's not another reporter in the place."

"How about Amy Gallencamp, over there?"

"You don't call the half-owner of a paper like the *Tribune* a reporter, Janie! Besides, she's not here for a story. She likes the stuff!"

"Shhh!" Jane said. "Make way for—" She consulted her program. "—Quartet No. 1 (Opus 16) Berezowsky."

In the middle of the second number, Jane sat up and clutched Kelly's hand. "Look!" she whispered, pointing to the far aisle. "Harold Gallencamp!" She was not the only one to notice the tired looking, gray-haired man come down the aisle. Before he had found his place, he was made quite uncomfortable by a look Amy Gallencamp fired at him. Once seated, however, he recovered sufficiently to shoot her one of his own, none the less hostile.

Jane's eyes glinted. "Kelly, there's a story! Maybe they'll have another fight!"

Kelly looked at her with pity. "Distinctly a Page sixteen item. We've run it a dozen times. Besides, you couldn't top the story a week ago about their plans for divorce and dissolving the *Tribune*."

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"Okay," Jane sighed. "I was only trying."

"Too hard," he said. "Stick to the music."

"Music," said Jane softly. "That reminds me." As unobtrusively as possible she left her aisle seat and tiptoed toward the exit at left of the stage. She was back a few minutes later when the violinist and spokesman for the group stepped forward.

He bowed formally, enjoying the effect of billowing hair as he straightened and announced: "Chamber Music Lovers, there has a request been made. Although this work is heard not ordinarily on such a program, this time I cannot refuse."

There was a pause while he stepped back, placed his violin under his receding chin, and gave the nod to his co-musicians. The melodious notes of Schubert's *Song of Love* sang out into the audience.

Kelly looked at Jane. Jane was looking at Amy Gallencamp. Amy was looking at Harold. Then the dumpy, little woman was winking back tears as Harold rose from his seat and made his way toward his wife.

Kelly shook his head. Amazement replaced his common expression of cocky assurance. "Wonder which one of them requested the music that was played at their wedding."

"Well, don't just sit there," she said softly, triumphantly, as she slid out of her place. "Let's scoop the *Tribune*!"

Amy and Harold Gallencamp never understood how it happened that the *Express* beat their joint announcement of reconciliation by a good hour and a half.

By the third day, George Joseph Jowlett had evidently remembered to look at his memorandum. Jane and Kelly attended a wedding officiated over by a golden-haired four year old, got a confession from a fifty-thousand dollar jewel thief, and interviewed a talking dog.

It was almost too easy, Jane thought, smiling to herself. Yet, somehow, the smile was forced, as forced as Kelly's was becoming. She looked at him anxiously, more sympathetically than she should have looked at her opponent. Yes, his carefree expression had been practically replaced by one of baffled anger.

It was early afternoon. She waited outside a phone booth while he dialed the *Express* office.

"Maybe they have a quiet little revolution for you," Jane said as brightly as she could.

"It wouldn't surprise me," he growled, "if my next was on how Margaret O'Brien had staged a coup d'etat and thrown Truman out of the White House." A minute later, he emerged from the booth.

"I can't understand it. I'm to go to the office and await my next. May have as much as a whole hour to kill."

"Poker?" Jane suggested.

"Poker," he replied viciously.

KELLY THREW down his coat, seated himself at his desk and began some fast two-fingered typing. "I'll get this story laid out," he told her.

Jane found a chair some distance from Kelly and sat down slowly.

Then opportunity came along.

"Well, Beautiful!" "Hi, Georgeous!" The two whistling copyreaders surrounded her with their admiring glances. She beckoned to them. Their response was immediate.

"Listen," she said in a low voice, "do you two play poker?"

Seventeen hands later, Kelly scowled deeply, and slid three tens, fourteen ones, and twelve fives into his unaccustomed wallet. Then he pushed back his chair. "Too bad, boys," he said. But the sorrow in his voice was for himself.

Kelly pulled Jane down, not too gently. "Come on, Janie. It looks as if I'm in the picture-moving business."

She stood by the desk. The two losers were leaving. The office was empty ex-

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cept for a man on the other side of the large, cluttered room.

"Wait a minute," Jane said, looking up at him. Her eyes glistened a little, suddenly wet. "You mean, you're conceding defeat after two falls out of three?"

Kelly dropped her arm and looked away from her. "No," he said in a strange voice. "I mean three out of three. I mean I've fallen for you in three days, like the sucker in your story."

Jane moved nearer to him. She put her hand on his sleeve. "Then, cancel that one, Kelly, because I—I reciprocate."

He whirled and looked at her. Amazement crinkled his forehead. She bit her lip and nodded her dark head. He shook his head, scratched it, and then suddenly, with a triumphant whoop, clutched her to him. The man on the other side of the room looked up briefly. "Women!" he muttered and went back to work.

Jane sighed a large, happy sigh. Then, resolutely, she pushed Kelly away from her. "And you can cancel the other two points you thought I won, because—"

THE DOOR marked "City Desk" opened quickly. The bulky figure of George Joseph Jowlett pushed through it.

"Ah, Miss Torbett." Though his factual memory was poor, he prided himself on never forgetting a name or a face, particularly a pretty face. "Hope you got some good material, my dear. Should make an exciting short story. Though we rather gave Kelly a steady time of it."

There was a pause. "Yes," Jane said. It seemed as if someone ought to say something, and Kelly was obviously too busy forming unprintable opinions of her to be able to reply.

"Something I meant to say to you, Kelly. It's—Hm. Escaped me. Ah, well." Mr. Jowlett chuckled once more, not at all disturbed by the fact that he was laughing alone, and walked away.

A long silence followed. Jane spoke.

"You were so smug," she said. "It was the only way I could show you up. You had me beaten to begin with. Just like our high school debates."

"Beaten," he said, advancing toward her. "A good idea."

"Kelly, I was about to tell you. Really! A signed confession!"

He put his hands on her shoulders with a grip more tense than tender, and walked away from her. "You can send your water color to my hotel." He started toward the elevator.

She watched him through tear-clouded eyes. Then she hastily blinked them back as the elevator door opened unexpectedly, and the solid, unmistakable shape of the City Editor reappeared. He put out a large hand and clasped Kelly's in a hearty handshake. "Remembered what I'd meant to tell you, my boy. You did a fair job of reporting these last three days. Especially that *Tribune* scoop. Seems almost as if a raise were in order."

Kelly gulped. "Thank you, sir!"

"Oh, don't thank me," George Joseph Jowlett said. He said it in his ordinary deep basso, but Jane heard it as an angelic melody. "Don't thank me; Thanks your friend there, Miss Torbett!"

Kelly was not a young man to disregard the advice of his superior, particularly when the superior had recently supplied him with a sizable increase in salary. He spent the next twenty minutes thanking Jane. Moreover, between his demonstrations of gratitude he managed not only to suggest but to have accepted a plan for a merger.

"And practically the best part of it," Jane sighed against his shoulder when she had caught her breath, "is that our water color problem has been solved. Think of *our* owning a pair of Dufy originals!"

"Correction," said Kelly sternly. "That is not the best part of it."

And he kissed her again.

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A Haven For My

By
VELDA
JOHNSTON

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Heart

Ellen didn't know that the mysterious, shuffling footsteps she heard in the fog were a foreboding of doom to her new-found happiness with Mark.

Synopsis

When *Ellen Reid,* publicity writer for Falcon Pictures, first met *Jerry Connor,* he was working as an extra for the same studio. After he confided his ambitions as an actor, she decided to ask top Falcon producer, *Warren Halstead,* to use his influence in Jerry's behalf.

From that day on, Ellen and Jerry saw each other constantly, and though they were very much in love, Jerry seemed reluctant to set a wedding date. When Halstead finally cast Jerry in a big picture, Ellen thought happily that there was no longer any obstacle

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in the way of their marriage. But she was dismayed to learn that, for publicity reasons, she and Jerry had to postpone their wedding until after the picture's release. Jerry seemed peculiarly relieved at the news, but before Ellen could find out why, she was called to New York to cover the premiere for the latest picture of Falcon's biggest star, *Madia Marsden.*

On the return trip from New York, Ellen's train collided with an old car in the middle of a rain-swept New Mexican desert. Ellen, who missed the train when she got off to walk, found herself alone in the storm with the taciturn young owner of the car. He explained that she must wait until the next day when the roads were dry to drive to Arboles where she could get a plane to Los Angeles. He grudgingly offered her the hospitality of his house for the night. She learned that his name was *Mark Craig,* that he was engaged in mathematical research and that he thoroughly enjoyed the comfortable simplicity of his lonely life on the desert.

An unpleasant surprise awaited Ellen on her arrival in Hollywood. There she discovered that a girl Jerry had married four years before had caught up with him and was threatening to divorce him—naming Ellen in the suit! There was only one solution, Warren Halstead decided—Ellen must immediately marry some other man. But who could she marry? No one in Hollywood could be trusted. Then Ellen remembered Mark Craig.

She went to Arboles and presented the proposition to Mark. Oddly enough he accepted immediately, although he refused the money the studio offered. They were married quietly and Ellen took up residence in the local hotel. It was a serene and peaceful few weeks for Ellen. She and Mark went riding, driving and dining together. Almost without knowing it, Ellen suddenly realized that she was beginning to love this man deeply. It was at this point that Halstead wired her to come back to Hollywood—Jerry was divorced and all was well.

But once in Hollywood, Ellen realized that all was not well. Jerry was drinking, was short-tempered and nervous. Then she learned that he had been dating the beautiful Madia Marsden. One night two things happened which Ellen was to remember later—on the sidewalk at Ciro's a small, shabby man caught Madia by the arm and begged her to speak to him. Madia shook him off angrily and threatened to have him locked up if he continued bothering her. Later that evening, Madia gambled heavily and lost—and *Frank Arns,* the casino's owner refused to extend her credit!

During the next days, Ellen thought longingly of Mark and the days they had spent together. But her loyalty and concern for Jerry kept her in Hollywood. Finally she could stand it no longer and suggested to Jerry that they call it quits.

To her great astonishment he begged her not to give him up—Madia was like a fever with him, he could only get over it with help. It was with great reluctance that Ellen finally gave in. She knew she no longer loved Jerry; but at the same time she couldn't leave when he needed her help so desperately. *Now go on with the story.*

Part III

JERRY'S penitence didn't last long. For two evenings he seemed elaborately attentive and eager to please. But the third evening he was much as he had been ever since she returned from New Mexico—abstracted, restlessly drumming his fingers on the table in the Wilshire Boulevard restaurant where they had dinner.

The next night he didn't show up until nearly twelve. He had been drinking so heavily and was in such a vile mood that instantly Ellen knew, not only that he had been with Madia, but that something had gone very wrong between them.

Ellen said, as he walked past her into the living room, "It's midnight, Jerry. You might as well turn around and go home."

"Don't be like that," he said, and strode rapidly toward the liquor cabinet.

"There's nothing to drink."

He turned. "Then let's go to a bar. We'll have to take your car. I came here in a taxi. My car's on the blink."

"It's late. Besides, it's dangerous to drive tonight. The fog's terribly thick."

"Now listen! I want a drink!"

She looked at him almost detachedly. Perhaps it would be best to take a drive, she thought, cold resolution settling around her heart. They were going to thresh things out tonight, and she wanted him to be fairly sober when they did so. An hour in the open air might help.

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"All right," she said, "but I'm going to drive."

A few minutes later, at Jerry's insistence, they left her convertible in the almost empty parking lot beside a Vine Street bar and then went inside. The bar, too, was almost empty. Two couples, evidently acquaintances of Jerry's, occupied a booth against the wall. He nodded to them and then walked to the bar.

He and Ellen ordered highballs, drank them in silence. At last Jerry said, "Ready for another?"

"I don't want another, and you don't either. You have to work tomorrow. Don't you see what late hours are doing to you? In Madia's case it doesn't matter so much because she's between pictures. But you're not. And Warren Halstead told me over the phone that for over a week you've showed up on the set without knowing your lines."

"Sure, Halstead would say that. He's jealous, too."

"If you mean that I'm jealous," Ellen said wearily, "I think it's gone beyond that. I don't even blame her anymore for your drinking and your late hours." She added thoughtfully, "Not that I wouldn't think it would be an excellent idea if someone cut Madia Marsden's throat."

She stopped, appalled. The bartender, back turned, his hands busy with a glass and a towel, was staring at her in the dimly-lighted mirror, his face shocked and avidly curious.

Jerry shoved his glass across the bar. "Another one," he said, and Ellen was too embarrassed to protest.

He left willingly enough, however, after the second drink. They drove out of the parking lot, down the foggy street. "Where to?" she asked.

"Out Santa Monica Boulevard is all right with me."

The fog was thickening, but it was still comparatively easy driving on the main boulevards. The yellow fog lights strung above the street penetrated the gray mist and cast a sickly, unreal glow over the wide boulevards, the sparse traffic. Jerry sat silently beside her, his chin sunk and his eyes half closed.

Suddenly he said, "How about driving up Fern Canyon?"

Fern Canyon ran off Santa Monica Boulevard. High on its steep sides, half hidden by giant eucalyptus and laurel, were sky-lighted artists' studio, the expensively simple retreats of celebrities, and the summer and week-end cottages of just plain citizens.

"All right," Ellen said. "It's about half a mile away."

THE moment she turned away from the amber arc lights she realized just how bad the fog had become. Here in the narrow canyon it moved thickly, sluggishly. As the convertible climbed, the air currents died, so that finally the fog was like a white wall, always retreating a foot or two before the headlights.

Ellen inched the car cautiously to the side of the road and stopped. She could just make out the rock-studded, sandy wall of the canyon a few feet to her right.

"We'll have to turn back," she said. "I can't even see the white center line anymore."

"Then I'll drive," he said, and made a grab at the steering wheel.

She pushed his hand away. His features looked strangely loose and blurred in the dashboard's light. She realized that the drinks at the bar, plus the ones he had consumed earlier, had had a cumulative effect, and that he was less sober now than he had been when he arrived at her apartment.

"You're in no condition to drive, Jerry."

"Then I'll go for a walk!" He slipped out of the car, slammed the door. "Maybe you won't be such a nagger by the time I come back."

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"Jerry!" she called after him, but his unsteady figure had melted into the fog. She wasn't going to chase after him, either on foot or in the car. Anyway, the walk might do him some good.

Now that he was gone, she noticed for the first time the absolute silence. She heard no voices from houses set high on canyon walls, no slam of a distant door or snatch of radio music, not even the sound of car motors on the boulevard which crossed the canyon's mouth. It was as if, quite suddenly, everyone and everything else had ceased to exist, and she, here in this little hollow scooped out of the choking white mist, was the last living creature.

The thought was so strong and unpleasant that it held her rigid, straining her ears for any sound whatever. It was with an absurd relief that she heard a car, its motor growling in low gear as it crept toward her from the opposite direction. Then her relief was replaced by a new anxiety. The car's driver, unable to see the guiding center line, might have wandered over to her side on the road, in which case he surely would not see her headlights in time to avoid a collision.

But the car crawled past, the only visible sign of its presence a faint luminous blur in the fog. And then that weird unbroken silence settled down again. She glanced at her watch. Two o'clock. Jerry must have been gone at least twenty minutes.

The minutes seemed to drag. She found that she was sitting bolt upright, hands clasping the wheel, her mouth strangely dry. Added to the uneasiness awakened in her by the silence and the motionless fog hemming her in was another feeling, perhaps much the same one which makes a dog stare fixedly, hackles rising, at a corner of the room which to human eyes is entirely empty. She had a nameless apprehension, a sense of hostile and evil forces at work beyond the fog.

Again she looked at her watch. Jerry had been gone nearly an hour. With sudden resolution she reached for the ignition key. She was going to let Jerry get home as best he could. She wouldn't spend another minute in this place which, on this foggy night, seemed alien and indefinably unwholesome.

Her groping hand discovered that the car keys were gone.

With a rush of anger she recalled how Jerry, when he had said, "Then I'll drive," had grabbed at the steering wheel. As he withdrew his hand he must have palmed the car keys. How typical, she thought bitterly. Even in his drunkenness, he had made sure that she would wait where he left her while he wandered off into the night.

Her resentment gave way before a return of that strange nervous tension. She tried to fight it off. She would just have to wait, unless she wanted to abandon the car and grope her way on foot down to the boulevard.

And then she heard the footsteps. Jerry, she thought with relief. But almost immediately she realized that it couldn't be Jerry. These footsteps were slow, scraping. Some trick of the fog must have distorted them, for they sounded louder and more hollow than any footsteps she had ever heard.

The footsteps, dragging and yet measured, came steadily on. Just someone out for a walk, she told herself tensely. Just someone walking a dog. But she couldn't stem the feeling that those footsteps were fateful, that in some way that shuffling, invisible walker was linked with her and her abandonment.

Which side of the road was he on? Her side? Jerkily she leaned forward and snapped off the headlights. Better to wait in darkness, she suddenly felt, than to risk guiding the owner of those footsteps to her.

Now she could tell that he was on the

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opposite side of the road. She sat rigid, her breathing quick and shallow, while the footsteps shuffled past, grew faint, died away entirely. Sinking back against the leather cushion, she drew a long quivering breath.

SHE waited for ten more minutes. The owner of the footsteps, whoever he was, must have reached the boulevard now, or climbed one of those long flights of wooden steps that led up to the houses on the canyon walls. Of course, he might be coming back, she might meet him—but it was a small risk, and it seemed better to take it than to continue her nerve-wracking vigil any longer.

She got out, closed the car door softly, started down the sloping street. A few hundred feet farther on she saw with surging relief that the fog was thinner. She could see ahead for several yards, and could hear the hum of traffic on the boulevard. She quickened her pace, the tap of her high heels distinct on the asphalt road.

A car was coming up behind her, its headlights shining past her onto the shifting layers of fog. The car drove a few feet ahead of her and then stopped on the opposite side of the road. An instant later she found herself blinded by the glare of a spotlight.

A man's voice called, "Want a ride, girlie?"

She hurried on, out of the spotlight's glare, down the sloping road.

A car door slammed. Instinctively she stopped, turned. She saw that the car was a ramshackle sedan, and that its driver was crossing in front of the headlights. She had a swift impression of a young man, tall and loutish and burly shouldered, in dark trousers and a leather jacket and pulled-down cap.

She stood there, rooted to the spot by a strange paralysis, while he strode toward her. "Don't you know," he said softly, "that it isn't smart for pretty girls to go out walking at three in the morning? Don't you know that any dame dumb enough to do that—"

Afterward she didn't remember running her hand over the sandy, stone-studded canyon wall, dislodging the loose rock, flinging it at him with all her might. All she remembered was the cry of pain and rage, and his hand going up to his face, and then his low, fluent cursing.

She turned and ran down through the thinning fog, vaguely aware of the awkwardness of her high-heeled sandals, and of the labored pounding of her heart. Cars were coming from the other direction now, several cars, thank heavens. But she didn't slow her footsteps until she reached the light cast by the boulevard arc lamps. When she was only a few feet from the gas station on the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Fern Canyon Road, the shabby sedan passed her, at a speed which suggested the rage of its driver, and turned with tires screaming onto the boulevard.

The gas station attendant was busy checking the totals on the gas pumps. Without speaking she walked past him into the glass-walled station house. Above the pay phone was a card which told her what number to call for a Yellow Cab. She dropped in a nickel, dialed, and asked for a cab to pick her up.

After she hung up she stood there for perhaps two minutes, her hand still on the receiver. Her terror was receding, and in its place was coming an exultant sense of freedom, as if a burden had dropped from her shoulders. That last nightmarish hour had freed her, freed her from the belief that she owed Jerry any loyalty, or still felt for him any love, or could build with him any worthwhile or even tolerable relationship.

Free! Her heartbeats were strong, exuberant. Now all the memories and longing she had repressed for more than two weeks rushed in on her with a poignancy almost painful. Memories of New Mexi-

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co's red-brown earth and piñon-studded mesas and rust-colored rivers. Memories of Mark Craig's strong, thin face and steady gray eyes. And a sharp, hungry longing to be in his arms, to surrender to the demanding warmth of his lips.

She was free, and she knew where she was going, and what she was going to do. If he still wants me, she thought prayerfully. If he still wants me.

TWO nights later, about eight-thirty in the evening, she followed the Arboles Hotel's only bellboy up the narrow wooden stairs. He unlocked a familiar door, switched on the light, set down her suitcase.

"Same room you had last time, isn't it?"

Lips curved in a soft smile, she looked at the carpet with its threadbare cabbage roses, at the white iron bedstead and the golden oak bureau. Once she had thought this room hideous. Now, because it was a kind of way-station to love, it seemed almost beautiful.

"Yes, it's the same room."

The bellboy put up the windows that overlooked the unpaved street, pocketed her tip, and left the room. Ellen went straight to the wall telephone and gave the operator downstairs a number.

The phone at the other end of the line rang several times. She could imagine him there at his work table, deep in the pages of pencilled equations, frowning with reluctance as he at last reached for the telephone.

"Hello."

Her throat felt suddenly dry. "Hello, Mark!"

"Ellen!" The way he said that one word dispelled her fear that he had forgotten her, that he no longer wanted her. "Where are you?" Then, with sudden doubt, "It is Ellen, isn't it?"

She said, past the pulse pounding exultantly in the hollow of her throat, "No, this is Mrs. Mark Craig."

He absorbed that in silence for a moment. Then he asked tautly, "Where are you?"

"The Arboles hotel."

"I'll be right over."

She was waiting in the bare little lobby when he walked into the hotel forty minutes later. They looked at each other, his gray eyes intent, searching, hers frankly surrendering and yet a little shy. And suddenly it was as if the events of the past two weeks had never happened, as if she hadn't gone away at all.

He touched her arm. They went out into the night, down the steps of the sagging veranda to the familiar old car. In silence they drove down the wide street until, abruptly, there were no more buildings, but just the level, sagebrush covered earth and the star-brilliant arch of the sky.

He stopped the car. He didn't ask her why she had come back, nor did she even think of telling him. There would be time for words later. He drew her to him, so close that she could feel the heavy, rapid beat of his heart, and brought his lips down on her upturned mouth. Their kiss was prolonged, filled with all the hungry yearning of the days and the nights and the hundreds of miles that had separated them.

At last he said, one hand pressing her head tight against his shoulder. "Is your luggage at the hotel?"

"Yes."

"We'll go back and get it."

A week later Ellen thought, So it can really happen like this. Not often, maybe, but it can happen to some people. You could find a happiness so calm and complete that you didn't have the faintest discontent with the present moment. You didn't wish to be a day older or a day younger, didn't long for any other spot on earth, didn't want the man you loved to be changed in any respect.

She was sitting in a straight chair in the living room of Mark's well-scrubbed little

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house, her typewriter on a small table before her. Yesterday she had started a short story, one of the stories she had always wanted to write, but hadn't had time for because of her studio publicity and fan magazine work. The front door stood open, and the sunlight of late afternoon lay warm on the white pine floor.

Mark sat at his work table across the room, broad-shouldered back turned to her, the pencil in his big right hand poised above a sheet of paper. Ellen knew that right now he was in a world completely divorced from human emotion, a world of numbers and pure logic, where she could never hope to follow him. And she was content to have it so. She was content because she knew that soon he would turn and look at her, as if to make sure that she was really there. His face wouldn't be controlled and faintly sardonic, as it had been when she first knew him, nor troubled and newly vulnerable, as it had been before she returned to Hollywood. Instead he would look as he had all this week, relaxed and yet very alive, years younger in his complete, secure happiness.

SHE looked down at her typewriter, tapped the space bar for a new paragraph. Her story wasn't about Hollywood, but about a trip to San Francisco she had taken at the age of ten with her mother. She hadn't thought about Hollywood very much this past week, not even about her last two days there. They had been hectic days. She had packed clothes, packed some of the bric-a-brac in her apartment for storage, and consulted a real estate agent about sub-letting the apartment. She had called Warren Halstead to tell him that she was quitting her studio job and going to New Mexico. It had been the first of a series of telephone conversations between them. Halstead had kept calling back every hour or so, demanding that she "come to her senses, make it up with Jerry, and come back to work." She kept patiently refusing until finally, in exasperation, she had hung up on him. After that he didn't call again.

Jerry hadn't even telephoned during those two days, nor had she tried to reach him. Evidently he had made his way back to her car that night in Fern Canyon, though, because the next day she found it parked on the street before her apartment house.

Mark's chair scraped across the floor. He got to his feet and stretched hugely, contentedly. Then he stood smiling down at her.

"Aren't you about through pounding that damned thing?" he asked.

Early the next afternoon Mark went to Arboles for supplies. Ellen was in the living room, dusting around the not-to-be-disturbed papers on Mark's work table, when she heard the hollow beat of hoofs on the hard earth outside the house. She walked to the door. With a sinking heart she watched Beth Hanson slide from the saddle, drop her mount's reins to the ground, and then walk purposefully toward the house, a slim, strong figure in blue jeans and a blue cotton shirt.

Ellen stepped aside as the blonde girl neared the door. "Come in, Beth."

Beth stepped over the door sill, turned to stare accusingly at Ellen. Her young face was pale beneath its tan, and her blue eyes dark with bitterness. Ellen said, "Mark isn't here right now."

"I know. I saw him leave. Why did you lie to me?" she burst out. "Why did you tell me your marrying Mark didn't mean anything?"

Ellen said, her voice quiet, "We fell in love. We couldn't help it."

Beth went on heedlessly, "Why did you tell me that Mark was marrying you just because of something that happened in Hollywood? Why should you tell me a lie like that?"

"It wasn't a lie." Ellen hesitated, re-

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luctant to return to the past even long enough to talk about it. "I planned to marry an actor named Jerry Connor," she went on finally. "This woman he'd married four years ago back in Ohio turned up and threatened to make a scandal that would ruin his career. His producer felt that the woman would be content with just a money settlement if I married someone else, and so I—I put the proposition up to Mark."

She paused, and then went on with a rush, "I tried not to fall in love with him. That's why I went back to Hollywood sooner than I expected to. But when I got there I found that Jerry had changed. Maybe I'd changed, too. Anyway, Jerry did something particularly outrageous, finally, and I came back here—to Mark.

"I'm sorry," Ellen finished, "particularly since I'd hoped you and I might be friends." She paused. "Suppose I make some coffee now, and we sit down and talk everything over."

"We don't have anything to talk over," Beth said fiercely, "and we can't be friends. I have just one thing to say to you. You'd better be good to Mark. You'd better make him happy. Or I—I'll take him away from you."

Her voice had wavered on the last words, as if she had felt a sudden conviction of her inadequacy to carry out her threat. Her face started to crumple, but before the tears came she turned jerkily and walked out of the house, her back very straight. Ellen watched her mount, jerk the horse's head around, and ride at breakneck speed toward the dirt road.

Feeling depressed, Ellen turned back into the living room. So she had achieved her own happiness at the expense of unhappiness for that nice, painfully honest girl. Well, she told herself, Beth's unhappiness wouldn't last. She was still very young. Probably she'd fall in love with someone else before long and she would forget Mark.

NEVERTHELESS that depression lingered, the first cloud on her happiness. Then, just as the afternoon light was taking on the red-bronze of sunset, Mark arrived, smiling that new, broad smile of his, and began hauling his purchases out of the car—food, new phonograph records, and a peasant blouse and skirt he had seen in the window of Arboles' only drygoods store. In his presence, the thought of Beth slipped out of her conscious mind.

The sun-drenched days and the clear, silent nights went past. There were walks and horseback rides over the sage-covered earth, and automobile trips to nearby towns and to the abandoned mining camps in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. There were meals, happily shared in the neat, plain little kitchen. There was work and music and love.

One night after dinner they lay on a blanket spread on the hard earth just outside the front door. They had glasses beside them, and one of the bottles of wine Mark had brought on his last trip to Arboles. He lay on his back, hands crossed beneath his head, pipe stem clenched between his teeth. From the darkened living room surged the last movement of the Beethoven symphony he had put on the phonograph. It was about the only music, Ellen mused, which could approach in majesty the deep blue, star-studded vault of the heavens overhead.

The music reached its last clear, serene note. After a moment Mark said into the silence, "Well, I suppose we'd better get the nine o'clock news and see how the rest of the world is staggering along. Not that I care particularly at the moment." He glanced at the luminous dial of his wristwatch. "Five after. We've missed part of it."

He got up lazily, moved into the house. Ellen heard the radio's powerful hum, and then the voice of the announcer in Albuquerque. "—talks leading to a possible

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new meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers.

"And now a bulletin from Los Angeles. Police throughout the nation were alerted today when Falcon Pictures notified police that Madia Marsden, world-famous star, has been missing for three weeks. A studio spokesman explained that Miss Marsden's disappearance had not been reported earlier because, on the twenty-fifth of last month, she had told her employers that she was leaving for a destination she preferred to keep absolutely secret. The two weeks expired last Thursday, but studio executives kept silent until today in the hope that Miss Marsden would get in touch with them soon. So far, questioning of Miss Marsden's friends, studio associates, and servants has elicited no information as to where she intended to spend her two weeks' leave of absence."

The twenty-sixth, Ellen thought. The night of the twenty-sixth she had seen Jerry for the last time. Now she felt she knew the reason for Jerry's vile mood that night. Madia had gone away, and had refused to tell him where she was going. And so, taking his alcohol-inflamed anger out on Ellen, he had left her alone there in Fern Canyon.

She had a sickening memory of how she had sat there in the unnaturally silent night, her nerves taut with the sense of some nameless evil operating somewhere in the white, opaque fog that hemmed her in. Suddenly it was as if that nightmarish hour had moved forward in time to touch and tarnish her happiness and Mark's. It was almost as if that fog had crept a thousand miles inland to dim the glowing New Mexico stars.

The announcer was still talking. "— requests that anyone who has seen Miss Marsden during the past three weeks notify his local police—"

Ellen shivered. Turning her head, she saw Mark's tall, wide-shouldered figure in the doorway. "Turn it off," she said.

His voice was quiet. "All right, darling."

THAT evening and all the next day she was haunted by an indefinable but strong uneasiness. The next afternoon, hoping to distract herself with work, she turned down Mark's suggestion that she accompany him on a walk over to Puma Mesa, where several times they had taken a picnic lunch. Standing in the doorway, she watched his tall figure move away over the level earth. Then she turned to her typewriter.

But she was still haunted by that sense of something evil out of the past waiting to destroy her happiness, just as some savage animal, lurking beyond the range of a friendly campfire, might wait for the strategic moment, for the fire to flicker out and the camper beside the glowing coals to fall asleep. She was not as surprised as she might have been therefore, when a black coupe drove up to the house and Jerry Connor got out.

She had moved to the door as soon as she heard the car's motor. Now she recognized the coupe as one which the Arboles garage offered for rent. Standing motionless, she watched Jerry walk toward her, his light brown hair golden in the sunlight, his lips smiling that tentative smile which she had once found so irresistible.

She said, her voice flat, "Hello, Jerry."

As he stood there a few inches beyond the doorstep his head was on a lower level than hers. He looked up at her with a smile which seemed to plead and to apologize, and at the same time to assume forgiveness. He said, "Hello, Ellen. Aren't you going to ask me in?"

Silently she stepped back from the door, and he walked past her into the room. Crossing the room, she sat down on one end of the studio couch and watched him while his quick, incredulous gaze went over the whitewashed walls, the plain

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furniture. She said, "Sit down, Jerry."

He sat down a foot or so away from her on the studio couch. She asked, "How did you find me?"

"Warren Halstead told me you'd gone to New Mexico. I flew into Arboles this afternoon and asked at the hotel where Mark Craig lived. Then I rented a car and drove out here."

Her voice was blunt and cold. "Why?"

His smile died. "To take you back with me, of course," he said after a moment, his tone more confident than his eyes. "You don't belong here. You belong back in Hollywood—with me."

She said quietly, "That's all over. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

He reached out, caught both her hands. "I know I treated you rottenly that last night. Yes, and for quite awhile before that. But it was you I really wanted all the time. I told you so one night."

She withdrew her hands. "You wanted me *and* Madia," she corrected. "You're like a kid in a candy store, Jerry. You want everything in sight, and you won't believe it will make you sick." She added, her voice completely matter-of-fact, "You're just not very grown-up, Jerry."

He got to his feet and began to pace the room, one hand rubbing the back of his neck in a distracted gesture she remembered. "All right," he said, "I admit I haven't been. But won't you give me a chance to prove I've learned my lesson?" His voice broke a little. "Can't you see I've been in hell, sheer hell, since you left?"

She looked at him, still impersonally, but with an involuntary twinge of pity. He did look as if he'd been having a very rough time. Faint lines bracketed the handsome mouth. His blue eyes were bloodshot, as if from drinking or sleeplessness or both, and there were slight puffs under them which, she reflected, must have presented a problem to the make-up and cameramen.

SHE said, "There's one thing you forget. I have a husband, and I love him. It's true that we meant nothing to each other when we married, but I love him now, and he loves me."

From the stunned look on his face she realized, half incredulously, that until now Jerry had believed it was only anger with him, only rebound, which had sent her to Mark. He said, heatedly and yet pleadingly, "You *can't* be in love with him. You were in love with me. You married him only to help me out of a mess."

Then as she just looked at him, her eyes steady, he demanded blusteringly, "How can you be sure you're in love with him, when just a little while ago you were in love with me? You don't know your own mind, Ellen."

"Oh yes, I do," she answered calmly. "Maybe what I felt for you was love, but if so it wasn't the kind that lasts. This kind will. Do you know how I know that? It's because what I feel for Mark isn't all stardust and moonbeams. It has all that, but there's calm in it, too, and strength, and peace." She broke off, a bit self-consciously, and then added, "It's just that I want to make you understand that there can't be anything for you and me, Jerry, ever again."

He stared at her for a long moment, his face drawn, growing desperation in his eyes. Then he took out a silver cigarette case and opened it, his fingers fumbling with the clasp. Watching his jerky motions as he lit a cigarette and dropped the burnt match into the big ash tray on Mark's table, she again felt a stab of pity. Then came the thought, But if he was so wretched without me, why has he waited all this time to come here?

Before she could formulate the question in words he turned back to her abruptly and said, "All right. I guess I've lost you. I guess I deserved to lose you. But won't you do a favor for me just as a

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friend? Won't you come back to Hollywood for a few days? We could fly back there this afternoon."

She said wonderingly, "But why?"

"Because I need you," he said miserably. "I'm in a jam, Ellen, a terrible jam."

Of course, she thought. Jerry's life was destined to be a series of jams. She asked, "Just what's the trouble?"

He began to pace the room again. "I'll tell you when we get back to Hollywood. I can't tell you here."

"It will be here or not at all, Jerry. I don't want to go back, even for a few days. And what's more important, Mark wouldn't want me to."

He stopped and looked at her for a long moment, his shoulders sagging, his face drained of hope. He said dully, "If you won't help me, then I'll kill myself. It's the only thing left to do."

The incredible words seemed to hang in the air between them. She said, "You can't mean that."

"I do mean it. It's that sort of a jam."

She looked at him with alarmed, searching eyes. People said that those who threatened suicide never actually committed it. But that, she knew, was one of those comforting but untrue superstitions. Those who threatened suicide quite often made good their threats.

She said anxiously, "If you'd just tell me what sort of trouble you're in—"

"I can't tell you now. I can't tell you until we get back to Hollywood. Don't ask me why. Anyway," he finished dully, "if you won't come with me, what difference does it make?"

SHE looked up at his haggard, suffering face. Perhaps Mark had been right when he said that Jerry's appeal was chiefly to the maternal instinct in women. Right now she was feeling a sense of responsibility for him, as one might for a wayward child. And in a way she was responsible, she reflected. Not for his weakness, but for the circumstances that had brought all his weaknesses into play. If she hadn't brought him to Warren Halstead, thus starting him on his way to stardom, Hazel Dodge would never have thought it worthwhile to track him down. And he would never have met Madia Marsden. And, perhaps, he would never have found himself in this latest trouble, whatever it was.

She said unhappily, "You know I'll help you, Jerry, if your trouble is that bad."

Life and hope came back into his face. Bending suddenly, he put his hands under her elbows and lifted her to her feet. "Ellen, my wonderful Ellen! Then you'll come with me?"

She said torturedly, "Well—perhaps—"

"Darling!" he said, with overwhelming relief. Then, after a moment he asked, "Could I kiss you, Ellen?"

Before she could answer, his lips came down on hers. She endured his kiss passively, feeling nothing but an impatience to have it over with.

At last he said, his hands gripping her shoulders, "We'd better leave right now. The pilot who flew me here wants to start by six."

She said, with a frightened sense of being swept off her feet and carried along by a rapid current, "But I can't leave right now. I'll have things to do first. A suitcase to pack, and—"

"Well, I can telephone the pilot at the airfield in Arboles, and tell him—"

He broke off, staring toward the doorway. Even before she turned, she knew with cold, sick certainty that Mark was there, that he had been there for perhaps as long as a minute.

She broke away from Jerry, turned. Mark stood with broad shoulders nearly filling the doorway, his shadow long across the white pine floor. His face was terrible, the mouth drawn thin, the gray eyes filled with pain and contemptuous bitterness.

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"Yes," he said. "Pack your suit case, by all means. I'm going to Mesaroja for the night, and when I come back I don't want to find anything of yours in this house."

He turned on his heel, disappeared. Ellen stared at the empty doorway, unable to speak, to move. She had the dryness of fear in her mouth, and a strange, high-pitched ringing in her ears. The long rectangle of sunlight on the floor looked suddenly unreal, like sunlight in a dream, or in a stageset in a darkened theater.

And then she found she could move. Swiftly she crossed the room, went out onto the doorstep. Mark had backed his car out of the lean-to which served as a garage and had turned toward the road. She screamed, "Mark!"

The car kept on, turned left onto the dirt road, moved away.

Jerry was beside her now. He said, in a tone of gentle reasonableness, "I'm sorry this happened, darling, but it's probably just as well. You can't really have fallen for a guy like that. He didn't even give you a chance to explain."

She turned on him fiercely. "What do you know about him? He wasn't saying that just to me. He was saying it to—"

SHE broke off. What was the name of that girl Mark had once been married to, the girl who wasn't alone when he returned home from the Army Separation Center a day ahead of time? Probably Mark had never mentioned her name. But Ellen could remember the calmness of his voice as he said, "I should have kicked her out right then, or gotten out myself."

His voice had been too calm. It showed how deeply he had buried his bitterness and disgust over that episode long ago. But today the sight of Ellen in Jerry's arms had brought it all to the surface, and he had reacted, not just to what must have seemed to him a new betrayal, but to the old betrayal as well.

Jerry said, "What do you mean, he wasn't saying that just to you?"

She said, from a tight throat, "I don't want to talk about it."

Placing his hands on her shoulders, he turned her toward him. "But you'll still go with me, Ellen? You must," he said urgently, "just for a few days. You can leave Craig a note, explaining everything to him."

Torn with conflict, she looked up at him. In the bright sunlight his face looked years older than when she had first met him. No matter what had happened between her and Mark, Jerry's trouble was still there, a trouble so overwhelming that he had threatened to take his own life.

"Go in and write the note," Jerry urged, "and then pack your suitcase."

A note, she thought. Sometimes you could explain things better in writing than in spoken words. And her absence when Mark returned would lend credence to what she would tell him in the note. If he found her gone, he might be more likely to believe that Jerry's trouble had been very urgent indeed. She said, "All right, Jerry. I'll leave a note."

Turning, she went into the house and sat down at the small table she had been using as a desk. She pulled a sheet of typing paper toward her, picked up a pencil. After a moment she wrote:

Mark dearest,

I am going back to Hollywood for a few days. Jerry Connor is in some kind of trouble. I don't know what it is. He won't tell me. But it's bad enough that he is threatening suicide.

What you saw this afternoon was not in the least what it seemed. I didn't want to kiss him; he kissed me. I have no feeling at all for him except pity and a kind of—well, I guess you'd call it a sense of responsibility.

Mark, I love you. You should know, after these three weeks, just how much I love you.

Please telephone me as soon as you've read this. If the real estate

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agency hasn't sublet my apartment, I'll be there. Otherwise call Warren Halstead's office at Falcon Pictures. I'll let them know how you can get in touch with me.

Please, darling, call me.

Ellen

She folded the sheet of paper once. Crossing the room, she propped the note between the pipe rack and the big ash-tray on Mark's work table. Then she turned to Jerry, her face white and strained. "All right. I'll pack a suitcase now."

Twenty minutes later Jerry's rented car moved down the road to Arboles. They were about half a mile from the house when Ellen saw, with a tightening of her already fine-drawn nerves, that Beth Hanson, mounted on the sleek bay mare, was waiting beside the road. As the car drew close she rode directly into its path, stopped.

Jerry said, "What the hell!" and applied the brake.

With one fluid motion Beth Hanson slid from the saddle to the ground. She strode to the car, her smile exultant, her blue eyes bright with a triumph touched with vengefulness. She leaned on the ledge of the car window, her quick glance moving from Jerry to Ellen and then to the suitcase and typewriter on the rear seat.

She looked back at Jerry. "You're Jerry Connor. I saw you in that movie." Her gaze leaped to Ellen. "You're going away with him, aren't you?"

Jerry said angrily, "Don't answer her. Who is she, anyway? And what business is this of hers?"

ELLEN said, "It's her business." To Beth she said evenly, "I'm going back to Hollywood for a few days, that's all. I'll be back."

Beth's smile widened. "Does Mark know about this?"

"In a way, yes."

"I knew he did. I saw his face as he drove past here about half an hour ago. And he didn't look as if you were coming back, not if he has anything to say about it."

She leaned forward slightly, her arms crossed on the window ledge. "I knew you wouldn't stay," she said triumphantly. "You don't belong here. You just don't fit in. But I warned you. I told you what I'd do if you ever hurt Mark. And now you have."

She turned away. She swung into the saddle, jerked her mount's head in the direction of Mark's house. Her sneaker-clad heels dug into the mare's sleek flanks. Then she was tearing down the road. Turning to watch through the car's rear window, Ellen saw the puffs of red-brown dust rise from beneath the galloping hoofs.

Beth would wait at the house while the daylight lasted. Then she would go home, but she would be back in the morning. And when Mark eventually returned, he would find her there, beautiful and vivid and frankly worshipping him.

But there was the note, she told herself. And then she wondered, with sudden sharp fear, "Will he get to read it?" The front door was open. Mark had the only key, and he seldom used it. People in this sparsely settled country often left their houses open. Beth would wait inside, rather than in the hot sun. If a match were applied to that piece of paper, in less than a minute it would be nothing but curling black ash.

But Beth wouldn't do a thing like that, Ellen reassured herself. Beth was fiery and self-willed, but surely she wasn't underhanded.

Jerry had started the car. He said, "What was the matter with that girl? Is she crazy?"

Ellen looked at his handsome, boyish profile. She thought of all she was risk-

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ing for this unstable, self-indulgent man who no longer awoke in her anything but pity and a reluctant sense of responsibility. She said, "No, Beth is very sane." She laughed, completely without amusement, "If anyone's crazy, it's me."

A few minutes before midnight Ellen and Jerry, preceded by the suave, middle-aged manager of the Gardens of Shalimar apartments, climbed the outside staircase to Ellen's door. The manager fitted a key into the lock, swung the door back.

"I suppose you'll get your key from the rental agency tomorrow, Miss Reid," the manager said. "Are you still planning to sublet the apartment?"

"Yes. I'll be here for only a few days."

"Very well. Good night."

"Good night, and thank you."

THE manager descended the stairs to where the blue spotlight beside the swimming pool shed its diffused glow. Carrying Ellen's suitcase, Jerry stepped inside the door, switched on the overhead light. Ellen's gaze traveled over the room. It looked strange and unfriendly with its rolled-up rugs, its sheeted furniture. Depositing her shoulder bag on the maple desk beside the door, she turned on the table lamp, switched off the overhead light, and drew the dust sheets from the sofa and an armchair.

Private conversation had been impossible in the small, four-passenger monoplane that had brought them from New Mexico, and equally impossible in the taxi they had hired at the airport. But now Ellen sat down on the sofa and said, "All right, Jerry, you told that when we reached Hollywood you'd tell me what this is all about."

He sank into the armchair opposite her. "It's Madia," he said.

She looked at him sharply. "Do you know where she is?"

He lowered his face into the palms of his hands. "Yes, I know where she is. She's dead—murdered. I buried her myself."

She sat there, frozen with shock, staring at Jerry's bowed head. She thought, Murder! And now she realized that she had dimly sensed, in those two weeks before she had freed herself and gone to Mark, that the raw, undisciplined emotions around her—Jerry's emotions and Madia's—were leading up to some ultimate violence. She had sensed it in the Santa Monica Boulevard gambling joint and the Central Avenue cabaret and the sordid little bars where Madia's avid desire for sensation had led them. And she had sensed it most strongly of all the night Jerry had left her alone in the smothering terror of the fog in Fern Canyon.

She asked, her voice flat, "Did you kill her?"

His head jerked up. "I didn't! I swear I didn't." Suddenly his mouth pulled to one side in a tortured grimace. "At least, I'm almost certain I didn't."

She said, still in that lifeless voice, "Where is she, Jerry?"

"She's—she's buried in the back yard of a house in Fern Canyon."

Somehow she had known what he was going to say before he spoke. She said, "You'd better tell me all about it."

He got to his feet and began to pace the room, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. "She rented that place in Fern Canyon a week before she—she died. I guess that wasn't the first hideout she'd had. Madia was—"

He broke off. Ellen nodded slowly. It was well-known in Hollywood that some of Madia Marsden's tastes were rather eccentric, and it was rumored that she often rented hidden-away places.

"She rented the place by letter," Jerry went on, "and under another name. She mailed the people who owned the place three months rent in advance—cash, not a check—and asked them to leave the key under the lowest step of the porch. They

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never saw her, or had any idea who she was. She told me that I was the only one who knew she'd rented the place, but maybe that wasn't true.

"She told the studio just that she was going away for two weeks. Then one night she told the servants in the Beverly Hills house to take the evening off. After they were gone she left too. One time she told me how she dressed when she didn't want to be recognized. Slacks, and a polo coat with the collar turned up, and a floppy felt hat with her hair pushed up under it. Dark glasses, of course, and no make-up. Well, she left the Beverly Hills house dressed like that and carrying a suitcase, and walked to Westood Boulevard to hail a cab. She didn't let the driver take her to the Fern Canyon house. She paid him off on Santa Monica Boulevard and walked the rest of the way."

He stopped speaking for a moment. In her mind's eyes Ellen saw the woman, world-famous face and figure hidden by the bulky coat and large felt hat, leaving the comparative respectability of her Beverly Hills home to make her furtive way through the dark, winding streets.

"I went up to the Fern Canyon place the night after she moved in. I had to leave my car in front of the garage on the the street—you know how the garages are set into the hillside up there—and then climb what seemed at least a thousand steps. It was nice after I got there, though. Small, just a living room and bedroom and kitchen, but nice. A fireplace, French windows along one wall of the living room, all that." He paused. "You remember the last time I saw you before you went back to New Mexico?"

SHE nodded. "The night of the twenty-sixth."

"I didn't get to your apartment until about midnight. I—I'd been with Madia up at the Fern Canyon place. We'd had a hell of a row. She told me that she wouldn't be seeing much more of me. Some man—she wouldn't tell me his name—was coming out here from New York. She said she'd met him the last time she was there, and that she'd written him down as 'unfinished business.' The way she talked to me she might have been giving notice to her gardner."

His face flushed with remembered anger. "I left her finally," he said. "I was pretty drunk by then, and someplace on Wilshire I smacked into one of those damned traffic islands and bent a front wheel. I called a towing service and then took a taxi to your place. I remember our leaving here in your car, and I remember having two drinks at that bar on Vine Street, but after that everything gets pretty hazy."

Ellen said tautly, "You suggested that we drive out Santa Monica Boulevard, and then you asked me to turn up Fern Canyon."

He nodded. "I remember asking that, just barely remember. I guess that even though I was beginning to hate Madia by that time, she was still sort of—sort of like a magnet to me. I remember your stopping the car someplace there in the fog. And I remember how I sneaked the car keys out of the ignition when you wouldn't let me drive, and how I left you there. I don't remember the walk from the car up the canyon, or climbing all those steps up to Madia's cottage. But I was there, all right. She was still up. She was wearing some kind of black velvet robe with a lot of silver embroidery on it. I remember having a couple of more drinks, and then quarreling with her. I—I think I struck her, but I'm not sure. Then everything blacked out."

He was standing motionless in the center of the room now, staring at the floor. "When I came to I was lying face down on the davenport. I looked around for Madia. She was stretched out on her back

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beside the fireplace. Her throat was—someone had cut her throat."

Again he broke off. Ellen thought of Madia lying there.

"For a minute," Jerry went on, "I just lay there propped up on one elbow, staring at her. Then I saw the silver paper knife, its blade red and sticky-looking. It was lying right beside the couch as if—as if it had dropped from my hand when I went to sleep.

"I got up. I didn't touch her. I went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. There was some paraldehyde there. She'd told me what it would do for you if you'd been drinking, how it would clear your head and steady your hands in a matter of seconds. I poured some into a glass. It was the foulest stuff I've ever tasted.

"I came back into the living room. My head was clear now, and I suddenly realized that it was dangerous to have the light on, with those glass doors all along one side of the room. I snapped the light off. Then I saw for the first time that one of the French doors stood open. I was sure then that someone else had been in the room, and that someone else had killed her. I hadn't opened that door, and neither had she. I remembered how once, while we were quarreling, I had started to open it, and she had yelled at me that she didn't 'want the damned fog creeping into the house.'

"But if I left her there, sooner or later she'd be found, and I'd be blamed for killing her. All I could think of was that I had to—hide her."

ELLEN looked at him wonderingly. Hadn't he felt any grief for the woman whose beauty had been an obsession for him? Evidently not.

"I knelt down and put my fingers on her wrist. There was no pulse. I'd known she was dead the moment I saw her lying there, but I had to make certain. I lit a match and looked at my watch. It was four. I had about another two hours until daylight. Then I started looking for keys. I found a bunch of them in the drawer of a small table beside the sofa. I took the keys and went out the back door and down all those steps to the garage.

"One of the keys fitted the padlock on the garage door. And inside the garage I found a shovel. I started back up the stairs, the shovel over my shoulder. That flight of stairs seemed five miles long, and halfway up that shovel began to get awfully heavy."

He paused, and Ellen stared at the floor, sickly fascinated.

His voice was hurried now. "There were some flat wooden boxes in the back yard, the kind people start small plants in before they set them out. I put the wooden boxes on the back porch. Then I dug a kind of—trench. The ground up there was soft, and it didn't take me long. I went inside and lit a match. She was just where I left her. I—

"Anyway," he said, "I took her out to the trench I'd dug. There was enough light. You know how it is in a dense fog. Sort of luminous. When I'd—I'd finished I smoothed down the earth with the back of the shovel and then put the flat seedling boxes over it. Then I went back in the house, pulled down all the blinds, and turned on one dim lamp. I washed the paper knife and put it on the table in the center of the room. I'd hesitated about that, because if someone else had come into the room and killed her the knife might have his fingerprints. Then I figured that anyone who would go to the trouble of dropping the knife right beside me would also have wiped the handle clean.

"After that I cleaned up the tiles where—where she'd been lying in front of the fireplace. Then I wiped off everything I'd touched or might have touched—door knobs, ash trays, the two empty glasses

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and whiskey decanter on the coffee table, the wash bowl and medicine cabinet in the bathroom, everything. In the backyard I cleaned the dirt off the shovel. I went down the steps, stood the shovel just where I'd found it in the garage, and went back up those steps for the last time. I left the keys in the table drawer, turned off the light, and went out the back door.

"I found your car down the canyon, just where I'd left it. I drove to your place and parked the car out in front. Then I walked from your place to my apartment house, because I was afraid to take a taxi. The fog was still thick, and there was hardly anyone on the streets at that hour, nearly five in the morning. And I'm sure no one saw me go into my apartment house."

"Not even the elevator man?"

"My apartment is on the ground floor, remember?"

"Yes, but wasn't he in the lobby?"

"No, the night elevator man gets what sleep he can on a cot down in the basement. You have to ring for him."

FOR A LONG moment the room was silent. Then Ellen said, her voice flat and tired, "What do you want me to do to help?"

He crossed the room, sat down in the armchair, and leaned toward her. "Marry me," he said urgently. "Hazel got her final decree in Reno two days ago. You can skip down to Mexico and divorce this Craig guy in just a day. Then we can marry. Maybe it will be ruled illegal eventually, but by that time—"

She cut in, her voice slow and wondering, "Did you bring me back here from New Mexico in the hope I'd do *that*? Jerry, you must be crazy!"

He said pleadingly, "Ellen, Ellen! I can give you so much. Even if the police do tie me in with—with Madia's death, it won't ruin my career, unless I'm actually indicted for murder. People have been mixed up in some pretty terrific scandals in this town, and some of them have come out of it bigger stars than ever."

She said, her voice sharp, "Tell me why you want to marry me. And don't tell me it's because you're so terribly in love with me, because I won't believe it. Tell me the truth."

After a moment he said, his eyes looking straight into her gray ones. "All right, here it is. When they find Madia, I'll be one of the first to be questioned. They may even bring me to trial. You're the only one who knows what happened that night, the only one who knows even that I was near Fern Canyon. If they put you on the stand, you won't be able to lie successfully. You've got one of those faces that show everything. But if you're my wife, they can't force you to take the stand."

She said, with a wry smile, "So that's it. That's why you even threatened to commit suicide this afternoon. You wanted me to come back here, because you thought that once I was away from Mark it would be easier to persuade me."

"You've got to do it," he said desperately. "You've just got to."

"I don't *have* to do anything," she pointed out sharply. "Maybe I'll help you in some other way, but I won't do that. I've risked enough for you already." Her voice trembled. "I want to get back to Mark. I want everything to be just as it was before you came there today."

He didn't give up easily. He pleaded, he cajoled, he tried to take her in his arms. She just sat there, her face white, saying repeatedly and firmly that she wouldn't marry him.

At last he leaped to his feet and strode across the room. He stood with his back to her for a moment. When he turned around his face was hard, cunning.

"All right," he said, "how would *you* like to stand trial for Madia Marsden's murder?"

(To be continued)

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Patsy's Good Deed

By VIOLA CORNETT

Johnny didn't know it but he was falling in and out of love at the same time.

JOHNNY PARSONS was feeling just about as low as a man can. He sat at the counter in The Diner, across the street from the office of the Santa Teresa *Herald,* and scowled down at his half-empty coffee cup.

But he didn't see the cup. Instead, he saw the lovely and mocking face of Sharon Lee, daughter of the *Herald's* owner, Evan Lee. Sharon had taken a whim to learn the newspaper business from the ground up, after her graduation from college. So now she was a regular fixture at the *Herald* office, doing whatever odd jobs she was equal to. And tormenting the life of dark, good-looking Johnny.

Johnny was the sports reporter. He had a by-line, Mr. Lee liked his work, and his salary was up to par. Johnny had been happy until Sharon turned up. Now he was in the sad position of a man who is in love with the boss's daughter—but is afraid it will be years before he can keep her in the style to which she is accustomed.

A soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "It can't be that bad. Nothing could be that bad!"

He jumped, and looked up to meet a pair of wide gray eyes with his own moody hazel ones. It was a new waitress, he'd never seen her before today. She had brown hair with a hint of curl, a tilted nose, and a mouth with a dimple at its left corner. The green and white uniform, with its starched cap, became her. She was cute, the judicial portion of Johnny's mind admitted. But, at the moment, his main reaction was emotional. He was annoyed. He said coldly, "Am I bothering you?"

She smiled at him frankly, and leaned her slim white forearms against the scrubbed counter. She had time for leisure, it was two in the afternoon, and the little restaurant was deserted, except for Johnny, who was taking a very late lunch hour today. She said, "No. But you look as though you're bothering yourself. What's wrong?"

Johnny scowled. "Nothing that another cup of coffee won't cure." He pushed his cup and saucer toward her.

She sobered a little, but not angrily; there was still a sympathetic look in her gray eyes. She filled his cup again, and set it back in front of him. Then she went on, "I'm not being nosey, really I'm not. It's just that I hate to see anybody look that unhappy."

There was something about her tone that reached him. Johnny stared at her half-warily for a moment, and then broke down. "I'm in love with the wrong girl, someone completely out of my reach. I can't think or dream of anyone but her, and yet I know it can't lead to anything."

"Why not?" she said.

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JOHNNY'S SCOWL came back. "Look, this is nineteen-fifty. People haven't believed in fairy tales for a long, long time. Besides, what man wants to put the reverse on the Cinderella story? My foot's too big for a glass slipper, anyway." And he grinned wryly and cynically.

She looked at him in a thoughtful way. "Rich girl? Or famous? Or just what is she?"

Johnny's mouth slanted. "Rich. And spoiled."

The girl dimpled. "You don't seem to have any illusions about her."

He shrugged. "You learn realism in the newspaper game. But so what? I don't expect a girl to be perfect. I'm not. All I ask is that she gives me that little old whammee. And she does, brother, she does!" He sighed.

Now the girl was frowning disapprovingly. "You don't talk like a man in love," she stated.

He glared at her. "What am I supposed to do, wrap rainbows around my ears, and chant blank verse? This is still nineteen-fifty, baby. And I'm just a newspaper man."

She grinned suddenly. "You're a man and you think that acting tough is an obligation. Come off it, and tell me how you really feel about this girl."

She had him then, somehow. Her smile made him drop the shield of cynicism, reluctantly, and speak very simply. "I can't think of anything but her, all day. She has blonde hair, and green eyes, and it seems like no other girl in the world ever looked so lovely in that combination, or any other combination. When she laughs, I want to conquer the world, and lay it in her lap. When she looks sad, I'd like to make her a necklace of stars, so she will smile again. In a simple little business suit, with a plain white blouse, she has it all over Helen, and Cleopatra, and all the lost women of legend. She—" His voice died. He stared into space, dreamily.

The girl let out a breath. "You do have it bad!" She paused a moment, looking at him, and then went on, "Would this girl be Sharon Lee by any chance?"

Red touched Johnny's cheekbones. He hesitated briefly, then admitted, "Yes."

She nodded. "She was in here at noon, and the other waitress told me who she was. I agree with you, she's beautiful."

There was a hint of reserve in her tone. Johnny could guess that Sharon hadn't made too good an impression on her. Well, he knew that Sharon was a spoiled rich kid. But she'd shape up if handled by the right man. All she needed was someone to tell her off when she got out of line. But he was scarcely in a position to do that.

The girl continued, "If you want her, why don't you go after her? It's a free country."

Johnny's mouth leveled. "Oh, yeah? There's still the grocer and the landlord. Free country or not, they're the boys who take my money."

She leaned her forearms on the counter again. "Romeo never talked like that."

Johnny's laugh was hard. "Romeo didn't live so long. Besides, he was a rich boy, and didn't have to worry about keeping Juliet in the style to which she was accustomed."

He was tired of palaver, suddenly. He got up and tossed down the money for his lunch. "See you," he said crisply, and strode out of the restaurant.

BACK AT the *Herald*, Johnny typed up a story moodily, but with only half of his attention. The other half was reserved for Sharon Lee, flitting about the big, desk-crowded room busily.

There were quite a few young reporters, and all of them had an eye for Sharon. Johnny felt irritated. The arrogant tilt of her chin, and the conquering glint in her eye were so aware of male admiration. He thought, That girl needs to be spanked

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—or kissed. And I'd like to be the man to do both!

Finally, she stopped beside his desk. Up to now, Johnny had maintained a preoccupied, distant manner around Sharon. But his talk with the girl at the restaurant seemed to have relaxed a few inhibitions. He said coolly, "Hi. How's things?"

She tilted her head to one side, a distracting habit of hers. Mocking, adventurous green eyes explored his face. There was a challenging, untamed something about her that made a man's blood run fast. She said, "The place is as dull as ever. I thought working on a newspaper meant excitement. I was *so* wrong!" Her mouth curled a little scornfully.

Sudden boldness shot through Johnny. He stood up, and looked down at her smallness masterfully, from his six-feet-two of lean height. He drawled, "Dull?" And a daring glint of laughter came into his hazel eyes as they met her green ones.

She looked surprised and then interested. She murmured, "Don't tell me I've been missing something?" She tilted her head to the other side, as distractingly.

You couldn't kiss your owner and editor's daughter in the city room. No matter how much you wanted to. Johnny took in a long, reminding breath, and stuck his hands firmly in the pockets of his casual tweed suit. But his voice held a challenging note, "Could be. Incidentally, what are you doing tonight, honey?"

He hadn't so much as looked at her crossways before this. Now his mouth went dry at his own daring. Then his heart leaped as he saw her smile. "Not a thing," she said softly, as she took in his strong brown face, his sensitive mouth, the curl in his black hair. "Not a thing so far."

That was how he made the date with Sharon. It was for the following night, Saturday. Johnny wondered how he could wait twenty-four hours to hold her in his arms, dance with her, maybe even kiss her good night, that is, if he was lucky.

The stories he wrote during the balance of the afternoon were just a little bit poetic around the edges. He even managed to toss a reference to sunset clouds into the report of a recent high school basketball game. When he left the office at five-thirty, he was walking on May air, though it was still April, and a bad-tempered April, at that. Inside The Diner, he strode to the counter. The brown-haired girl was still there. He winked at her as she took his order. "Just call me Romeo," he said.

She lifted an eyebrow. "What's this?"

Johnny chuckled. "I'm dating her tomorrow night," he went on proudly.

"Swell," the girl said. It seemed to Johnny that her voice was a little toneless, that it lacked the enthusiasm called for by his victory. But probably she was just busy and preoccupied. The place was full, the dinner rush was on.

He found he wanted to talk to her, so stretched his meal. At last, he was the only one left in the place. In an oddly reluctant way, she came over to him when he beckoned. "I'm tired," she said. "Glad I'm going off duty in a few minutes."

Johnny felt expansive and friendly. After all, it was this girl who had given him the courage to date Sharon. He said, "You shouldn't be tired. The night's young. How'd you like to take in a show with me?" And he beamed at her.

Her gray eyes lit. She looked pleased. "I'd like it," she said. Then she seemed to draw back a little, as though suddenly regretting her own words.

He grinned at her across the counter. His joy and triumph took in the whole world. "I'll wait for you," he said.

HER NAME was Patsy Dorsett. She came from a farm up in Humboldt County. "I got tired of the loneliness," she said. "My mother and dad don't mind

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it, but I like to look at people, not sheep."

She had a frank and steady sweetness that he liked. Johnny had never had a sister, but this was the kind of sister he would have chosen. He liked the way she enjoyed the gay musical playing at the local movie house. She was equally appreciative of the after-the-show snack at a pleasant restaurant on Main Street. Johnny was pleased to note that, like himself, she loved hamburger with onions, berry pie, and coffee.

Then he told her all about his dating Sharon. It seemed to him she acted a little quiet and withdrawn, but, after all, he was talking so much himself that she didn't have a chance to say much, and she had said that she was tired.

Finally he smiled at her across the table. "I'd better take you home," he said. She nodded, and got up. She seemed a bit subdued.

She lived at the Connelly Apartments. It was only three blocks from the heart of town, and Johnny enjoyed the walk with her. But as he stood in the small lobby, saying good night, he suddenly felt apologetic about not calling a taxi to take her home. "I just didn't think," he said. Then he grinned wryly. "My salary doesn't afford a car yet," he said. "Besides, I stay at a hotel, and there's no garage."

She smiled up at him shyly. "It's not important. I like to walk."

She was very sweet and small, standing there before him. On a sudden impulse, he put his arms around her. "You're cute," he said in a brotherly voice. He kissed her. It started out to be just a friendly kiss, but suddenly it was more than that. She clung to him and responded almost fervently. Then, abruptly, she pulled away, and smiled up at him again, unsteadily this time. "You do that well," she said. "But you'd better save your kisses for Sharon. She'll be taking up all your time from now on."

He felt strange and unsure for a moment. Then his emotions righted themselves, and he grinned. "I hope you're right." He held up crossed fingers. "Wish me luck, honey."

Her laugh was a little unsteady, too, but her voice was gay and encouraging "You'll do all right. Good hunting, just the same." She winked at him, then turned toward the stairs. "Good night."

"Good night," Johnny responded. But as he strode out of the lobby, once more, he felt a bit odd. However, it was a pleasant night, the wind that had blown so wildly that day had died, and there was a round silver moon overhead. He whistled as he walked down the street. He wanted to shout like a happy small boy, to chant over and over, "I've got a date with Sharon!" But he didn't, of course. He just smiled up at the moon, and thought dreamily of tomorrow night's date.

HE SPENT the following day in a kind of daze. Now that he had a date with Sharon, the imminence of it scared him. He had dated lots of girls, of course, but Sharon was used to the best. She was the orchids-and-sleek-car type. Well, she'd have to settle for an orchid and a taxi tonight. Johnny grew increasingly nervous as the day wore on.

He saw Patsy only briefly. She hadn't come on duty at noontime, and as he snatched a quick dinner she was too busy to do more than smile at him. Just the glimpse of her made him feel more confident, though. Something about Patsy had a way of lifting his spirits.

He rang the door bell of the stately Lee home at seven-thirty. A trim maid took his hat, and ushered him into the living room. No one was there, but the maid said, "Miss Sharon will be down shortly."

When she came, she looked charming in a gold dance dress, flecked with green

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that matched her laughing eyes. Johnny's breath caught as he put her fur coat about her shoulders. The perfume that floated to his nostrils was delicate, bewitching. She was all dainty, intriguing femininity.

It wasn't until they were in the taxi that he remembered he'd forgotten to give her the orchid he'd brought. It was still on the coffee table in the living room. Oh, well, it wouldn't have matched her dress, anyway. And Johnny sighed. He was out of his depth, and he knew it. But, just the same, he felt adventurous, reckless, intoxicated with Sharon's nearness.

He took her to the town's swankest night-club, of course. She was a feather in his arms, and his heart rocketed wildly when her soft hair touched his cheek as they danced. She talked and laughed a lot, making comments on the various people in the room. Some of the things she said were a little sarcastic, but so clever that Johnny laughed readily. A lot of people said Sharon had too sharp a tongue, but Johnny felt it was just high spirits that made her talk the way she did. And she was spoiled. But what else could you expect with her background? She was her widowed father's only child, and he had always indulged her every whim and fancy. Johnny thought comfortably, All she needs is a good, stubborn guy to tame her down. And he grinned to himself at the inner conviction that he was just the man for the job!

When he took Sharon home, he walked up on the front porch with her, while his taxi waited. The porch was deep and shadowed, and it seemed the most logical thing in the world to take her into his arms. The perfumed softness of her reached deep inside him, so that his mouth against hers was inevitable.

She laughed softly, and her laugh was part of the night and its beckoning mystery. Then she was gone, like one of the shadows, and nothing was left to him but the memory of her perfume on the shadowy air, and the sound of a door closing behind her.

He went down the steps in a daze and along the walk to where the taxi waited. He was still in that dreamy state when the cab let him out at his hotel.

JOHNNY felt so happy the next day that he had to share it with someone. After his late Sunday breakfast at a little restaurant near the hotel, he strolled over to Patsy's apartment house. When he knocked on her door, she opened it almost immediately. Her face lit up at sight of him, and then suddenly sobered. She said almost brusquely, "This is a surprise."

He guessed that her tone was due to the fact that she was dressed in an oversize smock, with a businesslike towel wrapped around her head. Apparently, she was using Sunday to clean her apartment. A girl didn't like to be seen unless she was looking her best. But, Johnny thought paternally, Patsy didn't have to worry. She looked cute, even in her quaint outfit.

He smiled down at her warmly. "Maybe I should have phoned ahead and told you I was coming. Sorry."

Her expression relaxed. "I haven't a phone, so you couldn't have called me. But that's all right; come in."

She'd apparently just finished cleaning house, for the place looked polished and shining. It was a small, old-fashioned apartment, but bright drapes and cushions gave it a homey look, as did the flowers in the small vases. Johnny looked about him approvingly. He said, "Nice place."

She smiled at him. "Thanks. I haven't had much time to fix it up, so far, but it looks a lot brighter than it did when I first took over."

She whipped the towel from around her head, and laid aside the smock. Under it, she was wearing a crisp yellow house dress. She really was a pretty little thing,

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Johnny decided. Her looks didn't knock you endways, as Sharon's did, but every girl couldn't be as lovely as Sharon. In her own quiet and sweet way, Patsy did very well.

Eagerly, he told her about the date with Sharon. Patsy listened attentively, if a bit quietly. When he got through, she asked, "When is your next date with her?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Gosh, I forgot to ask for one!"

Patsy lifted a shoulder. "Well, plenty of time for that. You'll see her in the office."

Then, abruptly, she changed the subject, to a movie they'd seen the previous Friday night. That gave Johnny an idea, now that he had the news of his date with Sharon out of his system. He said, "Look, how about taking in a picture with me this afternoon? There's a good one, I hear."

She hesitated, and then nodded slowly. "All right. Only it isn't time for the matinee yet. I'll get us some lunch first." And she stood up.

PATSY COULD cook, Johnny realized a little while later. Lamb chops, mixed green salad, mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie, and superlative coffee really appealed to a man's appetite. Johnny felt marvelously contented as he ate the last scrap of pie and drank the last drop of coffee. He was glad he'd thought of calling on Patsy.

The movie was good, too. It was very romantic, but Johnny felt in a romantic mood this afternoon. And the lovely blonde heroine reminded him of Sharon. He grew absorbed in what was happening on the screen, so absorbed that it wasn't until the main feature ended that he realized he was holding Patsy's hand. Embarrassedly, he let go. "Excuse me," he said. No girl appreciated affectionate gestures from a man who was in love with another girl.

Patsy said quietly, "That's all right." Her profile, Johnny noticed, relieved, was perfectly calm and placid. Patsy certainly was the sensible type.

After the show, he suggested going to a restaurant, but Patsy said she had two perfectly good steaks in the frigidaire at her apartment. Johnny didn't need to be asked twice, since he had already tested Patsy's cooking ability.

Dinner was even better than lunch had been. Johnny helped with the dishes, and then they settled down before the radio. She had the same taste in programs as he, Johnny discovered. They sat through the evening in companionable silence.

Johnny was startled when the station they were listening to went off the air at midnight. He rose to his feet with an embarrassed laugh. "Why didn't you throw me out at ten?" he said. "I'm afraid I've overstayed my welcome."

Patsy stood up, too. "I've enjoyed having you, Johnny," she said. Her voice was quiet and sincere.

There was a brief silence while Johnny looked down at her. She looked pretty and sweet and a little bit sad, and suddenly he felt like kissing her. But no. Patsy would resent the kisses of a man who was in love with another girl. She was the sort who needed, and deserved, a man who'd be all her own.

He cleared his throat noisily. "Thanks," he said. He picked up his hat from the top of the radio cabinet. "Well, good night. It's been fun."

Her mouth twisted faintly, it seemed to Johnny—almost bitterly. Then he decided he'd been mistaken as she smiled up at him. "Glad you've enjoyed yourself," she said.

She went to the door with him, and said good night cordially. Again Johnny felt that impulse to kiss her frank young mouth as he looked down at her. But again he restrained the impulse.

He was surprised that he didn't feel at

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all tired as he walked toward home. In fact, he felt alive and stimulated. It had been a pleasant day. Patsy was a thoroughly nice girl.

Oddly enough, it was Patsy he dreamed about that night. It wasn't a wild, magical dream like the ones he'd had about Sharon. It was very quiet. He was walking with her through a flowery meadow. Somewhere birds were singing, and the sun was bright overhead. In the dream, he felt happy and carefree, as though all was right with the world, and would be forever.

IN THE office Monday, Johnny boldly asked Sharon for another date. She looked up at him with laughing, veiled green eyes, and consented softly.

After that, he dated her often. Johnny knew his dates with the boss's daughter were causing a lot of speculation around the *Herald* office. One or two of the other reporters made kidding remarks about the subject, but no one said anything offensive, for the other fellows liked Johnny.

Three weeks passed. Johnny went through the days in a kind of dream. He did his work adequately enough, but that was because he knew it so well.

He saw a lot of Patsy, and told her all about how things were going with Sharon. Occasionally, when he wasn't dating Sharon, he took Patsy to a show, or out dancing. She was a very nice kid, and he liked her a lot. And she was certainly a wonderful listener.

Then came the night when Sharon said softly, "You know, Johnny, you interest me." And she trailed soft fingers down his lean cheek as they stood together on the Lee front porch.

A shiver went through him, but he didn't move. He just said hoarsely, "I'm crazy about you, Sharon. I guess you know that, don't you?"

She laughed, low. "I never thought I'd fall for one of Dad's employees. This will delight him, though. He's all for the honest young reporter forging ahead by sheer determination." She laughed again. "But I can wind Dad around my finger. Just you wait, Johnny!"

He hardly heard her words; he was too intoxicated by the nearness of her. He went back to his hotel in a rosier dream than ever, and tipped the taxi driver an amount larger than his fare. As far as Johnny was concerned, he had conquered the world!

The next day, he was called into Evan Lee's office. The big, gray-haired man smiled at him and said, "Parsons, you've been doing good work. You're about due for a raise, I think."

Johnny's hazel eyes lit up. Then he stiffened abruptly. He said, "You think I really deserve one, sir?" His gaze met the older man's with steady questioning.

Mr. Lee smiled suddenly and warmly. "I do. And if you're asking me what I think you're asking me, I don't run my business on my daughter's whims, much as I love her. Her speaking of you just called your work to my attention, that's all."

His tone carried conviction. Johnny's shoulders were squared proudly as he left his employer's office. The raise wouldn't make him rich, but it would make him able to support a wife. In a moderate style, but that would do to start out with, he was sure.

HE DIDN'T have a date with Sharon for that night, so he lingered over his dinner. When Patsy had a moment to spare, he told her about his raise, triumphantly. She smiled. "That's fine," she said. Her tone was oddly dead, though.

Sharon had been away from the office the day he got the raise; she was visiting an out-of-town friend. But the following morning, she came up to his desk, beaming. She said, "Did Dad give you that raise?"

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Johnny's face set. Then he said, "He gave me a raise, Sharon. But please don't talk to him any more about me. I can get ahead on my own steam." His voice was reproving. Much as he loved Sharon, he didn't aim to have the boss's daughter helping him like that. His male pride was suddenly taut inside him.

Sharon's green eyes widened. Then they narrowed suddenly. She said deliberately, "Don't use that tone to me, Johnny. I don't like it."

Johnny's mouth became tight for a moment. Then he relaxed and gave Sharon a coaxing smile. "Come off it. I didn't mean to put your back up. Let's not quarrel."

"All right," she said. But her voice was sulky, and so was her expression. She almost stalked away.

She kept away from him all morning. He felt disturbed about that, but knew instinctively that he mustn't make the first overture.

He was just finishing his lunch, talking to Patsy over a second cup of coffee, when Sharon walked angrily into The Diner. She sat down at the counter, and Johnny saw her, but pretended not to. He just went on talking to Patsy as though Sharon weren't there.

Then Sharon rapped on the counter. "Waitress! I'd like some coffee, please." Then her mouth curled unpleasantly. "Or are you too busy talking to serve me?"

It was a very little thing to mean so much. But suddenly, as a flushing Patsy went down the counter to wait on Sharon, the scales fell from Johnny's eyes. The magic was gone, the illusion had abruptly vanished. Sharon was no longer the shining center of his dreams, but a spoiled brat, a bad-mannered little snob.

PATSY poured coffee for Sharon. Her color was still high, and Johnny could see the glint of embarrassed tears in her eyes. When she got through with Sharon, Johnny called her, "Can you come back now, Patsy?"

As Patsy started toward him, Johnny looked Sharon directly in the eyes. He said coolly, "If you don't mind, Miss Lee? You see, this lady is a friend of mine."

Sharon got to her feet. "In that case," she snapped, "I'd better leave!"

Johnny smiled. "That's a good idea," he said.

He felt no emotion but satisfaction as Sharon stomped out of the restaurant. Then Patsy cried, "Oh, Johnny!"

Then he caught his breath suddenly, staring at the girl behind the counter. Why had he flared up at Sharon when she treated Patsy like a servant?

Johnny said slowly and wonderingly, "Patsy, I'm in love with you!"

Her mouth dropped open. Then it closed again, and set hard. She said, "You're upset. You don't know what you're saying."

He went on, "I guess I've been falling for you all these weeks, while I thought you were just a good friend. I guess—"

Then he stopped short, and his eyes were abruptly young and scared. He said, "I don't suppose you could ever feel the same way about me, could you?"

It was as though his uncertainty somehow freed her. She leaned toward him, and her hand gripped his. She whispered, her voice soft and sweetly tearful, "Johnny, I'm plumb crazy about you. But, with Sharon around, you didn't know I existed."

Warmth filled Johnny's whole being. He wanted to shout, to sing, to tell the whole world that he was in love—really in love, for the first time. But what he did was whisper. "Say," he said in Patsy's ear. "Do you think two people could manage a kiss with a counter between them?"

She chuckled. "I'm sure they could," she whispered back tremulously.

And she was right!

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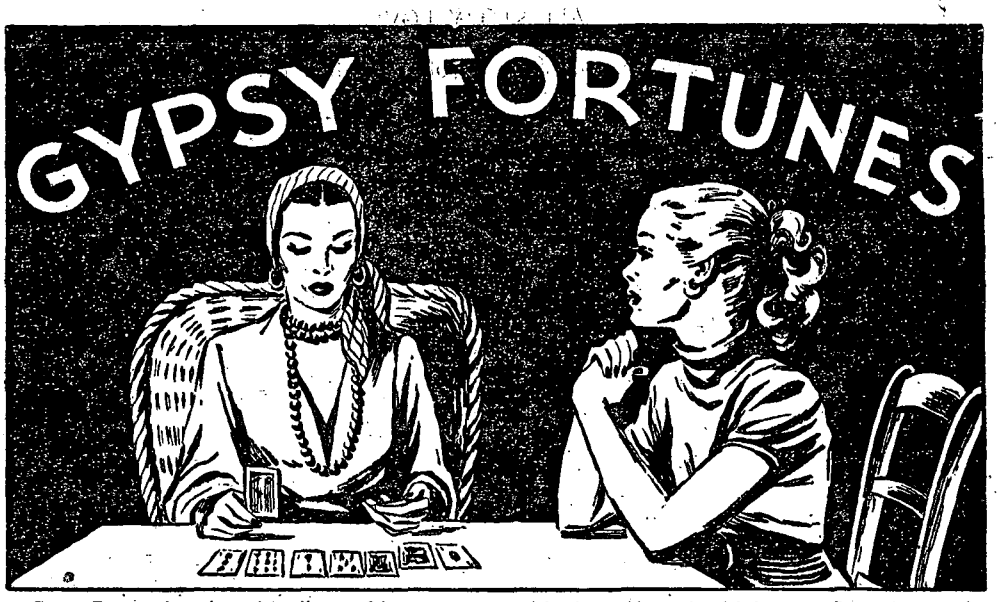


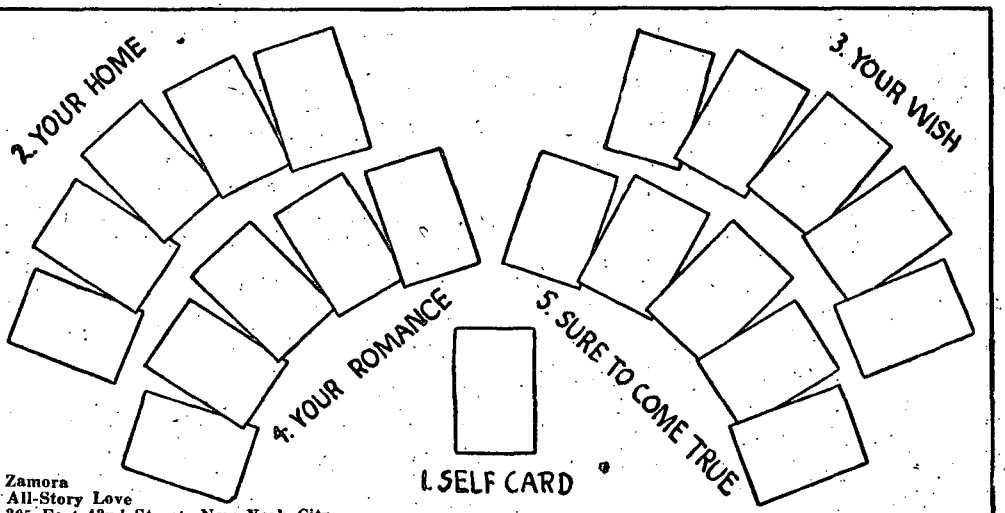
Cross Zamora's palm with silver—fifteen cents will do—and she will tell you a real gypsy fortune.

Select the card that represents you from a bridge deck: Queen of Diamonds if you are a very blonde woman; King if you are a man; Hearts if you are a medium blonde; Clubs if you are medium brunette, and Spades if you have black hair and black eyes. List that card in the space marked No. 1.

Now make a wish. Shuffle the full bridge deck with the self card withdrawn. Spread them in a horseshoe and select any twenty-one cards.

Lay them out in four piles of five cards each and you will have one card left. That is the surprise card.

Fill out the diagram and the coupon and send them with fifteen cents and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Zamora, and in a personal letter to you, she will tell you your fortune from the cards you have laid out.



Zamora
All-Story Love
205 East 42nd Street, New York City
Dear Zamora:

Here is a list of the cards in my fortune. What do they mean? I enclose fifteen cents and a stamped, self-addressed envelope for your reading.

NAME.....

STREET or BOX.....

CITY..... STATE.....

BIRTHDAY..... AGE.....

SINGLE..... MARRIED..... DIVORCED.....

6-50.

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By ALMA PORTEGAL

It isn't exactly true to say that strawberries and rhubarb are spring's official fruits, but with the first appearance of these two lucious, red-cheeked beauties, spring does seem to have arrived. And what more worthy use is there than to put them into mouth-watering desserts?

STRAWBERRY-ALMOND MERINGUES

4 Egg whites, beaten stiff
½ Cup ground almonds
Pinch of salt
1 Cup heavy cream
½ Teaspoon vanilla
¾ Teaspoon baking powder
1 Cup sugar
1 Quart strawberries
1 Teaspoon superfine sugar

Add the baking powder and salt to the stiffly beaten eggs and beat to incorporate them well. Add the sugar (1 cup) and mix well; then fold in the ground nuts. Drop on wax paper-lined cookie sheet and hollow the centers a little so that they can hold the berries later. Bake in a 275 degree oven for about 1 hour until lightly tinted and dry. Meanwhile wash and hull the berries and pick out the beauties that are pretty for the topping. Slice the remaining ones and sprinkle with one-half teaspoon of superfine sugar. Add the other half and the vanilla to the cream and whip it until stiff. At serving time pile berries in the center of the meringues, top with cream and decorate with whole berries.

ANGEL FOOD DELIGHT

This is what is known as a quick-trick dessert in our house, because its base can be a "boughten" or store cake, yet it looks elaborate enough for your guests.

One 9 or 10 inch angel food cake
½ Cup roasted shelled pecans
1 Pint whipping cream
6 Tablespoons confectioners sugar
1 Cup strawberries
6 Marshmallows
¾ Cup canned pineapple chunks
¼ Teaspoon vanilla

Place the cake on a serving plate. Carefully cut entire top from the cake about one inch down. Lift off this top layer and set aside. Remove center from the main part of cake by cutting down into the cake ½ inch from the outer edge, and ½ inch from middle hole, leaving a shell or wall all around.

Now start whipping the cream, adding the sugar and vanilla when partially whipped; then whip stiff. Divide the cream into two portions. To the lesser portion carefully fold in the pineapple, well-drained, sliced strawberries, marshmallows cut into pieces and the nuts chopped. Fill the cake cavity with this. Replace the top. Spread remaining cream over top and sides of cake. Chill in refrigerator about 3 hours or so before serving. This serves about 12.

TUTTI-FRUTTI SHORTCAKE

You make this of tag-ends—a little stewed rhubarb, a strawberry or two, some chopped raisins, dates and nuts all mixed together. Make your favorite baking powder biscuits and while hot carefully pull them apart into two halves. Place a generous spoonful of the mix on one half, top with the other part, heap whipped, sweetened cream on.

RHUBARB COBBLER

3 Cups diced rhubarb
1 Cup sugar
3 Tablespoons butter

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¼ Cup shortening
¼ Teaspoon salt
1 Tablespoon baking powder
¾ Cup sugar
1 Beaten egg
1½ Cups flour
½ Cup milk

Grease an 8x12 inch baking dish and place the diced raw rhubarb evenly over the bottom. Sprinkle with 1 cup of sugar; dot with the butter. Heat this in a 350 degree oven while mixing the batter. Sift the flour, salt, baking powder, and sugar together; cut in the shortening until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Mix the egg and milk, and stir into the mixture. Pour this batter over the hot rhubarb and bake 30 minutes or slightly longer. Serve with Cinnamon Sauce: Mix 1 cup sugar or light corn syrup, 2 tablespoons flour, ½ teaspoon of salt. Add 1 tablespoon red cinnamon candies and 1 cup of water. Cook all together for 5 minutes until candies are dissolved; then add 1 tablespoon of butter to the sauce. This serves 8.

SPRING AMBROSIA

3 Oranges
½ Cup mixed fruit cocktail
2 Bananas
¼ Cup superfine sugar
1 Grapefruit
½ Cup fresh strawberries
2 Tablespoons lemon juice
½ Cup moist, shredded coconut

Carefully segment the oranges and grapefruit to get nice even pieces. Use a large attractive shallow bowl and place cross-wise slices of the peeled bananas all around the edge of the bowl. Make a circle of the orange slices, then the grapefruit, working from the outer edge toward the center of the dish. Fill the center portion with the fruit cocktail mix (which can be canned or fresh fruits or a combination), adding the strawberries for color and any remaining pieces of citrus fruits that are left. Dust the fruit lightly with the sugar and lightly sprinkle the lemon juice over all, concentrating on the bananas in particular. Add the coconut shreds to the top; chill and serve.

STRAWBERRY DESSERT ROLL

Use any jelly roll recipe for the cake base or for a hurry-up you can substitute a bought roll, carefully removing the excess jelly from it.

For the filling you will need:

1 Tablespoon or envelope of unflavored gelatin
¼ Cup cold water
1 Cup sliced strawberries
½ Tablespoon lemon juice
¼ Cup sugar
½ Cup heavy cream, whipped

Soften the gelatin in cold water; then set the bowl of cold gelatin in a dish containing hot water to further dissolve. When liquid, remove dish from hot water; add the berries, lemon juice and sugar. Stir to mix well; set in refrigerator to partially set. When thickened but not firm, fold in the cream and chill again until almost set. Unroll your cake, spread over the entire surface and carefully roll again. Return to refrigerator to firm.

STRAWBERRY PARFAIT

20 Marshmallows
1 Cup crushed fresh or frozen strawberries
1 Cup whipping cream
3 Tablespoons lemon juice

Melt the marshmallow with a little of the juice of the crushed berries and the lemon juice. Use a small flame and watch carefully as it will burn easily. Stir occasionally to help in the melting. Remove to a refrigerator tray and freeze for a little while; then add the cream, whipped until almost stiff, carefully blending the two. Return to the refrigerator for 2 hours of freezing. This serves 6 to 8.

ONE QUICK TRICK

That's what we call it, for it is an emergency dessert par-excellence! You make it of a small oblong loaf of bought sponge or angel food cake, 1 quart or less of strawberries, or a mixture of strawberries, diced peaches or canned, crushed pineapple, a pint of ice cream.

Cut the cake, not too thick, into cross-wise slices. Wash, drain, and slice or mash the berries, as you wish, and sprinkle lightly with a little superfine sugar. Let stand while you fit a topping or layer of ice cream onto the cake then spread this with the berries and serve with hot or iced coffee.

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Dinner For Two

By
ALICE WARNER

Mary Lou's grocery list always read something like this:

¼ lb. butter
1 lb. coffee
Bread
Potato chips
Orange juice
½ lb. bacon
6 eggs
Small can peas
One lamb chop

It was when Mr. Filadelphia arrived at the one lamb chop that he let out a low moan. "Not good you should eat alone," he would sputter with violent gestures of the butcher knife.

Mr. Filadelphia—or Nick, as his oldest customers affectionately called him—owned the grocery store and delicatessen on North Avenue around the corner from Mary Lou's efficiency apartment and four blocks from School 61 where she taught the kindergarten. Nick's beady black eyes were softened by his ready smile and short surprised laugh. Small, on the chubby side, sparse black hair, he was no Adonis. No great businessman either, but friend and confidante to many customers starved for friendship as well as food.

Mary Lou had found him a good friend for she was new in town. She was usually tired by the time she reached the store at four-thirty, so she would hand Nick the list and gratefully watch him stack the cans and boxes on the counter while he talked volubly.

For weeks now he had said, "I want you to eat with Angelina and me and the babies. It's not good for you to eat alone. Fatten you up."

Meeting Angelina, Mary Lou could see what he meant about the added weight. Nick's jolly dark-haired wife made Mary Lou's hundred and ten pounds on her five feet four inches seem puny. Angelina said, "We expect you tomorrow night."

Mary Lou didn't want to hurt their feelings. She had already avoided Nick's indefinite invitations, but Angelina expected her so she smiled an acceptance. To tell the truth, a home cooked meal would taste wonderful. She had had very few home cooked meals since she left the Eastern Shore to come up to Baltimore to teach.

At six-thirty the following day she walked into the Filadelphia apartment above the store. She knew there would be three children, ranging from two to eight. Surely no one as old as the sandy haired young man who rose from the dark green sofa, laying down the newspaper with a slow reluctance.

Nick burst from the kitchen, aproned and perspiring. "Miss Cooper, Mr. Phelps. Call him Charlie, though. Charlie comes in to buy one pork chop. I can't see why he should eat alone either, so we invited him."

Mary Lou smiled warily. She wanted to say, "You're a sly old matchmaker and I can tell by the look in his brown eyes that Charlie Phelps is thinking likewise."

Charlie's eyes were wandering cautiously from Mary Lou's short auburn hair and violet blue eyes to her beige flannel suit with the frilly white blouse showing in front. She hadn't dressed with the idea of

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Dinner for two is a match-maker's first order to a girl's heart.

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captivating any strange young men. In fact she had worn an old suit so she would feel free to romp with the children if necessary. This was a different sort of dinner invitation anyway from the ones Miss Palmer, the vice-principal who knew the tea room circuit, issued or the little restaurants filled with the literati that Homer Filbert suggested. Homer worked at the library, studied Spanish in his spare moments and called Mary Lou faithfully every Wednesday.

To forget this Phelps person's frank gaze Mary Lou turned to the children. Before she could think of an excuse, she was playing piggy back and hide and seek with three black-eyed laughing youngsters. Charlie didn't escape either and Mary Lou had to laugh when he tried to hide his long lanky frame behind a rocking chair only to get his foot nearly ground off as the eight-year old Tony stepped on the rocker.

When Nick called "Ready!" they were all gasping for breath. Mary Lou gasped more when she saw the kitchen table, spread with a red and white table cloth and weighted down with food.

Charlie said, "Home was never like this."

"You mean there is one man who thinks his mother's cooking isn't best?" Angelina joked smilingly.

"Mom went to work when I was nine," he said flatly. "After the divorce I learned how to start a meal and how to wash dishes."

"You'll make someone a magnificent husband," Nick exclaimed.

Mary Lou swallowed hard. Nothing like being thrown at a man. I wouldn't blame Charlie if he left right now, she thought.

Rapidly she shifted her gaze from his face to his maroon tie and grey suit and finally to the table. Charlie also concentrated on the food for the next hour. Angelina had prepared golden brown fried shrimp and Greek salad with its tomatoes, cucumbers, black olives, peppers, goat's milk cheese and potatoes. To go with it, crusty Greek bread. For dessert, a paper thin pastry delicacy, and steaming hot coffee. An air of well being and contentment pervaded the room.

Between comparisons of Greek, American, Italian food, Mary Lou pieced together information about Charlie. Born in Ohio he had moved East to do press relations work for an airplane manufacturer. He was twenty-six, had worked his way through college, smoked a pipe, read biographies, went to Saturday matiness to see Westerns and liked sports. Self-assured, yet with a certain little-boy shyness, he was attractive, Mary Lou had to admit. But he was definitely on guard and he, too, must sense Nick's watchful attitude as he obviously studied their reactions to each other.

"I'll do the dishes," Mary Lou volunteered, figuring the time she spent in the kitchen would shorten the evening.

"I'll dry," Charlie insisted.

So while Angelina and Nick put the children to bed, Nick suggesting a bridge game later, Mary Lou and Charlie found themselves alone at the kitchen sink.

The conversation began as polite tell-me-about-you type of thing. However, Mary Lou discovered in telling Charlie about her teaching position and her way of life that she was making it very clear she was happy living alone. Charlie, in turn, proceeded to relate how wonderful it was being able to come and go as he pleased, not having to keep the apartment any neater than he wanted, sitting around in shorts if he chose, answering only the demands of his job. "Guess I'm just a born bachelor," he said.

Mary Lou wanted to tell him his parents split-up had evidently warped his ideas on matrimony. Instead she said, "Do you have the feeling Nick's dabbling in match-making?"

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Charlie nearly dropped a coffee cup. "He's working on the wrong people I'm afraid. We look hopeless."

"Definitely," she agreed. "But as my old Aunt Tillie would say, 'He's a good old soul, who means well!' "

"Check," Charlie said. "We mustn't disappoint him too badly. We can shoot each other sweet, significant glances all during the bridge game."

When she and Charlie hurried to the living room Nick and his wife were already seated, leaving no question of partners. Charlie caught Mary Lou's eye and they smiled like two cats with two canaries. They were soon forced to watch their cards though for Nick turned out to be a psychic bidder, a lucky player. All his finesses worked and he gathered in his tricks with a cheerful confidence that left a surprised Charlie and Mary Lou on the defense, fighting hard. At eleven o'clock Angelina said, "You two must be lucky in love."

Charlie cleared his throat nervously. "Let's call it a night," he pleaded. "I'll drive you home, Mary Lou."

"I was going to suggest that," Nick said happily.

I bet you were, Mary Lou thought. "I only live around the corner, Charlie," she said determinedly.

"The streets are dark," Angelina reminded her.

Charlie grinned suddenly, patting Angelina on the arm. "Relax, honey. I'm taking Mary Lou home."

I might as well relax, too, Mary Lou conceded. Arguing against the three of them is hopeless. If Charlie insists on being the perfect gentleman, and pleasing the Filadelphias, let him. After tonight, I'll probably never see him.

Walking down the long flight of steps and out to Charlie's coupe at the curb, Mary Lou tried to ignore this inner contentment that was growing dangerously. It was just the good food and company, she told herself flatly, plus a beautiful spring moon and a cool soothing breeze.

Charlie said, "Like to go somewhere for a beer?"

Mary Lou listened to the tone of his voice carefully, trying to decide whether this was politeness or genuine desire. "It's late, Charlie," she said briefly, "and tomorrow's a working day."

"Sure," he agreed readily, starting the car.

He took her arm as they walked up the white marble steps to the vestibule of the house where Mary Lou occupied a second floor apartment. "Good night," she said softly. "It's been fun."

"Sure has," he told her. Swiftly he leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips. It was barely a kiss really, but Mary Lou's heart speeded up noticably.

"That would please Nick," she said lightly.

"I thought it would," he said, grinning as he hurried down the steps.

Mary Lou walked slowly upstairs, let herself in and turned on the light. The apartment seemed so small, so still, so untouched. She reminded herself fiercely to have a party soon. For Homer and Miss Palmer and some of their friends. Not Charlie though, her mind warned. He wouldn't come.

Next day she had an unusually busy day with little time to think. Instead of stopping at Nick's she went right home, slept until seven and fixed an omelet for dinner. She wouldn't analyze her dread of seeing Nick. The expectant gleam in his black eyes, the questions he would surely ask would be too much to take. But she had to visit the store eventually, so the following day she forced herself to shop for the week-end. Nick said, "Charlie's nice, yes? You make pretty pair."

Mary Lou didn't argue.

Sunday she asked Homer and Miss Palmer for supper. She fixed a salad she hoped was comparable to Angelina's, but

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the gay, informal air was lacking. Miss Palmer would undoubtedly have felt more at home with a tomato stuffed with chicken salad. Homer suggested a foreign movie, and coming home in a taxi he dropped Miss Palmer off first. He held Mary Lou's hand, and told her he was becoming very fond of her.

Mary Lou gazed at him wonderingly. I'm lonely, she admitted. Then a voice deep inside whispered, "Not that lonely."

Monday when she hurried into the grocery store Nick wore an eager, hopeful expression. "Good week-end, yes?"

"I had a little party," she said gayly.

Nick's white teeth flashed. "Was there anyone I know?"

"I'm afraid not."

Nick scowled darkly. Mary Lou bit her lip, wondering frantically, If it meant so much to Nick, what harm would be done if she asked Charlie over for dinner? Perhaps he had a dull week-end, too. Perhaps he might be glad to join her.

Who are you kidding? her heart inquired. She ignored it and said, "Make that two lamb chops, Nick."

The smile returned like a rainbow after a storm. Nick lifted the cleaver as he would a wishing wand.

Walking to the apartment Mary Lou reasoned that if she called Charlie at the last minute it would look like a friendly, neighborly gesture. She could let him think it was just to please Nick. With growing excitement she dashed into the kitchen, humming her own swing version of a kindergarten song. The telephone rang lustily and she caught her breath. Could it be? No, that was foolish.

"This is your old friend Nick," a voice said. "Save the lamb chops. Someone just bought two pork chops. It's better if the man makes first advances, yes?"

"Oh, yes," Mary Lou breathed. After she hung up she rushed about the apartment, dusting, mopping, polishing. An hour went by and the telephone remained passive, impersonal. Mary Lou roamed aimlessly until six-thirty when she decided Nick must have been mistaken. Charlie probably decided to eat both pork chops. Maybe he got a raise in pay. Or maybe he had invited someone else to share his meal.

The last frightening idea sent Mary Lou back to the chair beside the telephone, willing it to ring. She sat there remembering Charlie's grin, his quiet brown eyes, his long lankiness and his deep voice. Lastly she remembered his kiss if you could call it a kiss.

You're a fool, Mary Louise Cooper, she thought. And you're sitting here on the brink of starvation.

With that lecture out of the way she slapped together a cheese sandwich, unable to bear the sight of the neglected lamb chops.

She had taken the first bite when the front door buzzer buzzed insistently. Dazedly Mary Lou pushed the bell. She listened numbly to the loud footsteps drawing near. A deep voice called, "So you're home, honey."

She hid the sandwich behind her as she thrust open the door. She hoped the light in her eyes wasn't too great. "Won't you—won't you come in, Charlie?" she said softly.

He entered hesitantly, scanning the room. "Any company?"

"Why, no," she assured him quickly, wishing she had changed to something more feminine than the gray wool dress.

"Eaten?"

"Oh, yes," she blurted out.

"Well, put on a date dress and we'll go dancing?"

I'm hearing things, she thought frantically. I must have fallen asleep and I'm dreaming. Yes, that's it. I'm dreaming.

But Charlie looked very real standing there frowning slightly. Mary Lou crept toward the closet, reached for a blue silk dress that matched her eyes, and rushed

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into the bathroom. She gulped down the rest of the sandwich, dressed, brushed her hair until it shone, and applied more lipstick than usual. When she rejoined Charlie the prim, conservative look was gone. He let out a low whistle. "Add some highheeled black shoes and let's go."

By midnight Mary Lou glowed with happiness. They had gone dancing at Green Spring Inn, then for a ride through the valley, with Charlie's arm tight about her shoulders. He had kissed her beside Loch Raven—a real kiss filled with warmth and tenderness and promise.

But then Charlie was shaking her by the shoulders. "Why didn't you call me?" he demanded. "I waited until seven-thirty and then I ate the two pork chops."

"But I thought—I mean, Nick said—"

But Charlie was angrily insisting, "I thought it would look better if we ate at your place. But Nick—What did you start to say about Nick?"

Next day there were two very early customers at the Filadelphia Delicatessen. Charlie spoke first. He said, "I have a bone to pick with you, Nicholas, and I don't mean a pork bone. We would like to know why you called us both with misleading information."

Nick beamed excitedly. "I'm glad to see you're mad," he said happily. "The night I introduce you you're both polite, indifferent, cold as my frozen crab cakes. That's bad. I figured last night you'd be just as polite. Stubborn."

"So you tried to keep us apart!" Mary Lou said incredulously.

Nick's shoulders shook as he laughed. "I wanted you to sit for hours pining, getting lonely, getting curious. You hate me, but you miss each other, yes?"

Mary Lou smiled sheepishly, but Charlie reached for her hand. "Definitely yes."

Nick reached for the meat cutter. "Two chops," he said heartily. "Good, very good."

Conversation

We've politely said all the things
That people are supposed to say:
Do you like good books and movies—
And isn't it a lovely day?

And now we've disposed of these,
Let's forget about the weather,
And hear what our hearts are saying,
While we share a kiss together!

—Pauline Booker

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You can lead a man to love but you can't make him marry.

Lead Him To Love

By RHODA HALL

MARGIE PAUSED in the hall and took out her notebook. She checked the name written there with the name of the frosted glass door: Roger Hamilton, Attorney. Then she took a quick look around. There was no one in sight in the long narrow hall, so she stepped under the skylight and took out her compact. A girl has to look her best when she is applying for a job.

A sudden thought stopped her cold. Suppose he hired her? She stood there, tiny powder puff suspended in mid air. She hadn't thought of that possibility until now.

She already had the best job in the world. This visit was just an excuse to meet Roger Hamilton and size him up for Lillian Drew, the girl who wanted to marry him.

Then reassurance flowed through Margie like a sigh of relief. She remembered that he couldn't afford to hire a secretary. Lillian had said he'd just graduated from law school and that he was barely able to pay his office rent.

"I must apologize for his miserable little office," Lillian had said. "I never go there myself. It breaks my heart to see it."

I'll be darned if I'd apologize for the man I loved, Margie thought with a toss of her head. I'd be proud of his struggles and his gumption.

She looked into the small, square, compact mirror and lightly powdered her nose. It was a short, straight nose that tilted upward ever so slightly at the end. She had bright, wide-apart blue eyes with long, gold-tipped lashes. Silken hair, the color of ripe wheat, fell to her shoulders in windblown drifts.

She brushed a tendril of fair hair back into place and snapped her compact shut. She straightened her slim shoulders and lifted her small chin, and then opened the frosted door.

She caught the young man behind the desk unaware. He had his feet up on the desk and seemed to be darning a sock. In a flush he swung his long legs to the floor and dropped the sock by his feet. His face flushed red with embarrassment.

"I heard you come up the stairs," he said, "but I thought you went on down the hall."

His eyes met Margie's and time stood still. For ages they seemed to stand there just looking at one another.

Lillian had told her about the smallness of his office and the shininess of his serge suit, but she hadn't said a word about Roger himself. She hadn't said that, at the very first glance, you somehow knew that he was just about the nicest person you'd ever met. She hadn't said that he had kindly brown eyes that could crinkle with laughter or get soft with understanding. That his hair was reddish brown with just a hint of a wave

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"What would you do if I kissed you now?" he asked softly.

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in front. That his face was lean and strong and masculine. That he was—Margie swallowed—just about everything a girl could want in a man.

Suddenly she hated herself for coming here. It was a mean, contemptible thing she had done in promising Lillian to help trick him into marriage. He was much too nice for Lillian.

"Well, hello," he said, and the unspoken words in his eyes were soft and endearing.

Margie walked toward him, her heart acting up in a way it had never done before. He held out his big hand to her, and they shook hands.

"Well!" he said, and he sounded pleased at what he saw.

Margie gently freed her hand from his.

"I'm looking for a job," she blurted out.

"I sure wish I could give you one," he said with genuine regret.

And suddenly she was sorry, too. Working with him in this tiny office would have been heaven on earth.

SHE BECAME aware of the aroma of roasting beef and looked around. It seemed to come from the bookshelves over there, but that couldn't be. Books just don't smell like roast beef.

I must have been out in the sun too long, she told herself. I'm imagining things.

"Been looking for a job long?" he asked.

"No, not long."

"I guess it's pretty tough to find a job these days."

"Yes, I guess it is," she answered absently, and looked toward the books again. Her mouth was watering from the aroma. "Are those real books?" she ventured.

He looked puzzled. "They're law books. Why?"

"Law books couldn't possibly smell like roast beef, could they?" she murmured.

Roger laughed. "I didn't know you could smell my dinner cooking out here. My kitchen is hidden behind the book case. I think I'd better look at the roast. It'll be getting too brown. Don't go away."

She watched him walk over to the shelves of book that reached almost to the ceiling. One section rolled outward on castors and revealed the hidden door to his apartment behind.

"An invention of mine," he explained. "I have plenty of time to dream up ideas like this."

He disappeared through the door.

Margie caught sight of the sock on the floor near the desk. He must have kicked it into view when he went out into the kitchen. She picked it up and her heart turned over with pity. The poor dear. He had simply bunched the hole together and had wound the darning cotton round and round the lump of cloth.

Flipping open her notebook, she wrote: Roger H. needs wife who is domestic. Someone who can cook and darn socks. Not Lillian.

Then she went back and crossed out the last two words. After all, there was a handsome bonus in it for Margie if she could get Roger to propose to Lillian.

And how Margie needed that bonus!

"Lock the office door and come on in," Roger called out to her. "If you're afraid, I'll find a sledge hammer for you to protect yourself with."

She put her notebook in her purse, locked the door and took the sock through the secret entrance with her.

JUST INSIDE the door she stopped short and looked around in surprised delight. It was a one room apartment with oriental straw matting on the floor, yellow flowered chintz covering on the furniture, crisply billowing curtains before the open windows and flowers blooming in bright red pots. A folding screen hid the stove and sink from view. In one corner of the room was a tiny breakfast

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nook. The table was spread with a lace cloth and a centerpiece of yellow jonquils. Everything was immaculate and shining.

"How about sharing the roast beef with me?" he asked. "It's just big enough for two people."

Margie stepped around the folding screen. He was busy basting a tiny roast that was no bigger than his hand. There were potatoes and carrots browning in the pan beside it.

"Can I help?" she asked.

"Just sit here and look pretty," he said, and indicated a high kitchen stool nearby. His eyes fell on the sock in her hand. "What have you got there?"

"I snooped," she answered. "I thought you might like to have me darn it for you so you won't be crippled when you try to walk."

He opened a bottom drawer of the kitchen cabinet and pulled out a fistful of undarned socks. "Here's some more snooping for you to do," he said, tossing them into her lap. At that moment he caught sight of her engagement ring. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"Toby Michael."

He put the roast back in the oven and began to make a cream sauce for the peas. For a long time he was silent.

"I wish I was the one who was marrying," he said, looking up at her. Their eyes locked and held. It was such a casual remark, but the gentle way he said it made her feel that he had added the word "you" under his breath. Her whole being soared and danced. She dropped her gold-tipped lashes before the look in his eyes, and she felt her cheeks go pink under his gaze.

You're going to be getting married a lot sooner than you know, she thought to herself.

With Margie Leonard in there pinch-hitting for cupid, Roger didn't have a chance. He had never heard of Margie Leonard, but if she had mentioned the name Pamela Powell he would have recognized it instantly.

Pamela Powell gave advice to the lovelorn in the *Daily Chronicle*. For years and years the cub reporters on the *Chronicle* had been writing this column until they graduated to better things, and for years and years they had all been writing the column under the name of Pamela Powell. Readers of the *Chronicle* thought it was about time the old gal retired on an old age pension, never dreaming that the present writer of the column was a fair-haired, blue-eyed lass of twenty-two.

Margie had been answering love letters and solving other people's problems for almost a year now, and she was getting sick and tired of it. She wanted to be a full-fledged reporter and cover news stories. But the city editor said that more people were reading the column since Margie had taken over than ever before.

Maybe it was because she tried so sincerely to help the people who wrote in to her. She bought stacks of magazines and read gobs of articles on how to keep marriages from breaking up, how to raise children, how to cook, garden—and how to win a husband. Margie could have taught cupid a few tricks of the trade. Every day, letters poured into the office from girls who had followed Pamela Powell's advice and now they were going to be married.

There wasn't anything Margie didn't know on the subject of how to make HIM fall in love with you.

She wrote such priceless things as: If girls would spend more time in the kitchen learning to cook and less time at the beauty parlor, there would be less bachelors in the world. Or, You've got to plan a campaign of action if you want a husband. Remember, all's fair in love and war, and wars are won by well-planned campaigns.

Oh, she was a whiz kid when it came to giving advice to lovers.

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BUT FOR the life of her, Margie couldn't smooth out her own love problems. She'd been engaged to Toby Michael since she was eighteen. Toby was tall and blond and ambitious. Too ambitious. Every time he got a job, she and Toby would make their plans to get married, but as if there was a secret conspiracy against them, he always got fired just before the wedding. Toby was always trying to give orders to his boss.

"It just kills me to take orders from some dumb cluck who isn't half as smart as I am," he'd say. "I should have my own business, then there'd be nobody to hold me back. I could start with something small, like a hot dog stand, and in no time at all I'd have a whole chain of restaurants."

"Well, why don't you go in business for yourself?" Margie would ask.

"With what? A pair of shoe strings?" he'd answer bitterly.

"How much would it take?"

"If I had two thousand, I could run it up to a million."

But where could either one of them get two thousand? Toby couldn't hold a job long enough to get his debts paid off, and Margie had exactly eighty-nine dollars and fifty cents in the bank. He might as well ask for a diamond-studded automobile. It wasn't any more ridiculous.

Then one day he called Margie up at her office.

"I just saw the opportunity of a lifetime," he said. "A hot dog stand is for sale for a thousand dollars. Just think, if we were married, you could quit your job and we'd both work in the stand together. In no time at all we'd take in enough to open a high class restaurant. I've got ideas. All we need is a little stake of a thousand. You couldn't talk your folks into mortgaging their house to help us out, could you?"

Margie was shocked. "Toby, you don't really mean that!"

He sighed. "No, I guess I don't. I'm feeling sort of desperate. If I had that hot dog stand, we could get married right away." He yawned noisily. "Well, look in the gutter when you walk home tonight. You might see a thousand dollar bill laying around somewhere. I read about things like that happening, but the only thing I've ever found was a fifty cent piece with a hole in it. I'll be seeing you tonight."

After she hung up, she sat at her desk and thoughtfully nibbled the end of her fountain pen. If there were only some way she could help Toby raise the money. It was high time he got settled in a job so they could be married.

IT WAS right about then that Lillian Drew walked into the office. But, of course, Margie didn't know who she was then. Lillian had soot-black hair and a skin as creamy white as her choker of pearls. There was a long mink stole draped about her shoulders. She dropped into a chair as if she were too tired to stand, and her white hands lay limp in her lap.

"I'm Lillian Drew," she said, and looked at Margie as if she expected her eyes to pop open. But when Margie only smiled back at her, she added, "My father was Senator Drew. He died six years ago while he was campaigning for governor."

The name was only vaguely familiar to Margie. Six years ago she had been far more interested in angora sweaters and high school dances than politicians. But she smiled as if the name evoked tender memories.

"Oh, Senator Drew!" she said.

"I feel rather foolish coming here," Lillian said with a faint frown. "I don't usually go in for this sort of thing, but I'm desperate and willing to try anything once. However, I expected a much older woman. A sort of mother in whom I could confide."

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"Oh, I'm wise beyond my years," Margie said mischievously.

"I've been reading your column for almost a year now," Lillian confided. "You seem so wise when it comes to solving lovers' problems."

"I guess I have brought a few couples together," Margie said modestly. "It's all just a matter of working out a campaign to get your man."

"Then perhaps you can help me work out some sort of plan. I've been dating the same fellow off and on for five years, but I just can't seem to get him to propose."

Margie smiled encouragement. "It's really very simple if you go at it right. First, you have to know what kind of a girl he wants to marry. You might even have to make yourself over into that kind of girl."

"He's sweet and considerate, and I'm sure he's in love with me," Lillian went on. "We grew up together, and I made up my mind when I was twelve years old that he was the man I wanted to marry. He comes of a good family, and at one time they had money. But they lost it all on the stock market some years ago. Roger, the man I'm in love with, is proud and independent and stubborn. He has a miserable little office. I've only been there once, and I was so ashamed for him to have an office like that."

Margie said nothing.

Lillian fussed with her mink stole, and then added, "I'm sure my money is the only thing that stands between us. He's too stubborn and proud to marry a rich woman. He seems to think its manly to starve and be independent. But I could do so much for him. I have all the money my father left me, and I could make him governor if he would just let me."

"Does he want to be governor?" Margie asked.

"No. He's content to be a lawyer. But I know he's capable of greater things. I want him to carry on where my father left off." She paused and surveyed Margie critically. "I'll pay you a thousand dollars if you can get Roger Hamilton to propose to me within six weeks."

Margie almost fell off her chair.

Pulling her mink stole about her shoulders, Lillian prepared to leave.

"I put myself in your hands, Pamela Powell," she said. "You map out a campaign for me, and I'll do whatever you say. I'll even make myself over into another person if you think he'd like me better. Call me when you have something worked out."

She sailed out of the office, leaving Margie so stunned she could barely collect her wits in time to say good-bye. Her mind was jumbled with thoughts of a hot dog stand and an exquisite wedding gown she had seen in a store window.

BUT BEFORE she could even begin to map out a campaign, Margie had to meet Roger Hamilton and find out what type of girl would be right for him. And from the very first moment her eyes had looked into his, she knew that Lillian was all wrong for him.

Roger wanted a girl who would enjoy taking walks through the zoo on a Sunday afternoon. A girl who couldn't pass a furniture store window without stopping to look in longingly. A girl who would darn his socks and jolly him out of it when he got blue and discouraged. And who would sometimes need him to lean on.

Margie had learned all this about him, and more, while they had shared the roast beef that was just big enough for two people. Every moment she had spent with him, she had been more and more convinced that Lillian was all wrong for him.

But for a thousand dollars Margie was going to do her darndest to make the heiress over into the kind of girl he wanted.

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So the next day, after the letters were answered and the column on the way to the presses, she sat at her desk and nibbled the end of her fountain pen. Somehow, she had to figure out a campaign for Lillian Drew.

After a while Murphy came in and sat down in a chair across from her desk. Murph was the *Chronicle's* theater critic.

"What's buzzin', cuzzin?" he asked.

So Margie told him about Lillian's visit, and then asked, "Now, how do you make an heiress over into a sweet little home girl?"

"First you put her in the right setting," Murph answered. "Give the guy a chance to see her in a little cottage kitchen, looking sweet and simple in a ruffled apron and with a smudge of flour on her nose. There's something irresistible about a girl with a smudge of flour."

Between them, she and Murph worked it out. Lillian had a summer cottage out at the lake. So the thing for Lillian to do was to invite Roger and another couple out to the cottage for the week-end. Between now and the end of the week, Lillian could take some cooking lessons so she would be able to cook a couple of meals for Roger. She could also learn to knit and pick up her knitting whenever they were all sitting around. That would cinch the domestic touch.

"That will give her a new personality," Margie admitted. "But that isn't enough. We've got to make him fall in love with her, see her for the first time."

MURPH SNAPPED his fingers. "I remember a play from a few years back. A young couple who hated each other got lost in the woods and came upon a little cabin where a sweet-faced little old lady lived alone, rocking by the fire and dreaming of a lost love. She told the young couple how her lover had died on the eve of their wedding fifty years ago. But she still dreamed of him. Then she told the young couple's fortune, telling them they were meant for each other. By the time the young couple left the cottage they realized that they were in love, and they had thought it was hatred."

"That was a play," Margie reminded him.

"But we could stage a scene just like that," Murph said. "I know a lot of sweet little old lady actresses who are just dying to earn a few extra dollars. I've always wanted to be a director, so here's my chance. I'll coach the sweet little old lady in her lines, and I'm sure I have at least one friend with a cottage near the Drew's. I'll borrow it for the week-end."

So it was arranged. Lillian was pleased with the plan and promised to pay all expenses. She even promised to send Murph a new wrist watch as a gift.

"But I can't have any of my friends out to the cottage for the week-end," she told Margie. "They would ruin everything by talking about champagne parties and yachts. If Roger is to see me without my money, then I should entertain new friends. How about you and your boy friend coming out for a visit? You do have someone on the string, don't you?"

On the string is right, Margie thought. Every day the string gets longer and longer, and we get farther and farther apart.

"But of course, Roger mustn't know that you are Pamela Powell," Lillian added.

"He won't find out," Margie promised. "And I think it's a good idea for me to be on hand to help you and see that nothing goes wrong."

So Friday evening they all met at the cottage. Margie had never before seen a cottage like it. There were twelve rooms and a separate building for the servants' quarters, a boathouse and a four car garage. But this week-end, there were no servants on the premises. Lillian was to do all the cooking.

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The moment they entered the house, Toby flung himself down full length on the long davenport and pulled out a six inch cigarette holder. Margie stared. Then he began reciting in a bored voice about his family's money and how he himself was thinking of buying a string of race horses for a hobby.

Margie fled to the kitchen, her cheeks red with embarrassment. Her silken yellow hair was caught with a pale green ribbon that matched the green of her dress. It was a simple linen dress with big patch pockets and a full skirt nipped in at her tiny waist. Her wide-apart blue eyes glowed with excitement at sight of the beautiful kitchen equipped with all the latest gadgets. Then she remembered she wasn't to touch anything. This was Lillian's show.

A MOMENT later Lillian appeared, wearing a deep purple dress that was almost identical with Margie's. She tied a crisp new pink organdy apron about her waist.

She turned to Margie with a confident smile. "I want you to sit down and watch me. I'm going to cook steaks and French fries all by myself. I learned so much at that cooking school!"

Margie sat down and folded her hands in her lap.

It seemed that Lillian had hardly gotten the electric stove turned on when she gave a yelp of pain. She had burned the palm of her hand. Roger came running out into the kitchen and quickly spread butter on the burn.

"You'd better go in and keep Toby company," he told her. "Margie and I will take care of things out here. We're old hands at this sort of thing."

Lillian looked from one to the other of them uncertainly.

Margie winked at her reassuringly and took her aside. "Don't worry about it if you don't get to show off your cooking," she whispered. "Everything can't work out just as we planned it. Tomorrow is the day when you and Roger get lost and go to the old lady's cottage. That's what really counts, not cooking a mere steak."

"I hate cooking anyway," Lillian answered.

But when they awoke the next day, the sky was black with low hanging clouds and the air was chilly. They lit a roaring fire in the fireplace and played canasta all morning. Lillian's hand was still painful, so Margie prepared lunch. Later Roger dried the dishes for her.

And the better acquainted they got, the more Margie's conscience troubled her. He was much too nice to be tricked into marriage like this, she told herself. A man should have the right to choose the girl he wanted, and not have a girl he didn't even love forced on him by a matchmaking expert.

When they had finished the last dish, he looped the dish towel about the back of Margie's neck and, holding onto both ends of the towel, drew her to him.

"What would you do if I kissed you now?" he asked softly.

Margie looked up at him with wide blue eyes. His firm, strong mouth was very close to her own. A little shiver of excitement ran through her. She tried to draw back, but Roger held her a prisoner. Her blood pounded at his nearness.

"Answer me," he said with a sudden huskiness in his voice.

For one wild moment she wanted to reply, "Kiss you back." But she couldn't betray Lillian. And there was Toby to think of. Toby, who needed only a little boost to make something of himself.

She put her hands against his chest and gave a little push.

"Behave yourself," she said coldly.

The tenderness retreated from his eyes. Instantly he moved away from her.

"Sorry," he said in a flat voice.

She had hurt him. Margie reached out

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a small hand to touch his sleeve, but drew it back sharply. She turned away from him and walked from the room. She went in to where Lillian was sitting with her knitting in her lap. Toby was stretched out on the davenport blowing wobbly smoke rings.

"Why don't you and Roger go for a walk?" she prodded Lillian.

The heiress looked shocked. "It's going to rain!"

Margie turned away to hide her exasperation. She wanted to cry out, "But that's all the better! If it rains, you'll have a wonderful excuse to seek shelter." But she said nothing.

"Tomorrow will do as well," Lillian said.

Now, if it were me, Margie thought fiercely, I'd be out there getting Roger lost right now, with not a minute wasted.

"I'm going to borrow your station wagon and go into town after some eggs," she told Lillian, and dashed out of the house.

Anything for an excuse to escape the disturbing presence of Roger. Besides, somebody ought to go over and tell the old lady that the visit was postponed, so she wouldn't stand at the window all day watching for the lovers.

THE SKY had grown more menacing, and when Margie backed the station wagon out of the garage, the first scattering of raindrops fell. At that moment Roger came running out of the house and climbed in beside her.

"I was going to take a walk into town," he said, "but there's no point in shrinking my clothes. So I'll just ride in with you."

Margie riveted her eyes on the road ahead. She wished he wouldn't sit so close. She seemed to be having difficulty with her breathing.

Neither of them spoke as the big car took the dirt road that skirted the lake shore, but she was aware of his every movement, and she knew that he kept stealing little sidewise glances at her.

The rain began to come down in torrents, as if the heavens had suddenly opened up. She slowed the car down to a crawl, for it was almost impossible to see through the thick curtain of rain ahead. Mud clotted the tires like chewing gum.

"We could walk faster," Margie said.

"If you want to make me really happy," Roger replied, "you can drive even slower. Being out in the rain with you is just about the nicest thing that ever happened to me."

She didn't answer, but her heart lilted crazily.

A little later she said, "I have to stop in for a moment at a cottage near Half-Moon Cove, wherever that is."

"Turn down this side road."

She swung the car onto the small, deeply rutted road and drove as close to the edge as she dared, so as to watch for the mail box with the name Brewster painted on it. That was the name of the people who had let Murph take over their cottage for the week-end. Lettering that looked suspiciously like Brewster loomed out of the gray, drifting rain. Margie inched the car closer. The back wheel slithered into the ditch.

"Now I've done it!" she cried.

"You got us in," Roger said. "Let's see if I can do as good a job of getting us out."

They changed places. But the more he spun the wheels, the deeper they got into the rut. He shut off the motor.

"We'll end up in China that way," he said. "Maybe I can get a plank from these people and put it under the wheel. You go in the house and keep warm until I call you."

HOLDING HANDS and laughing like school children, they ran through the rain. A dog barked at them from under the porch, but didn't venture out into the

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rain to challenge them. They bounded up the porch steps, and instantly the front door flew open.

A sweet little old lady with wrinkled cheeks and a halo of white hair stood there. She was wearing a lavender shawl and a black silk dress with a white lace collar pinned down with an old-fashioned brooch. There was a spicy aroma of hot gingerbread in the air, and the merry sound of flames snapping on the hearth.

"My car is stuck in the mud and—" Roger began, but she cut him off.

"Come in, my children," she cried in a birdlike voice. "Come in and warm the home and heart of a lonely old woman."

Margie winced. She thinks I'm Lillian, she thought. I've got to get her alone and set her straight right away."

Roger looked down at Margie. "You're soaked through," he cried, and taking her arm, led her over to the fire.

He pulled over a hassock and made her sit down on it, then he slipped off her shoes for her and set them in front of the fire to dry.

"I don't want you catching cold," he said, "because then I'll be up all night taking care of you."

The old lady fluttered past them. "I'll make some hot tea right away."

Margie made a move to rise. "I'll go help her."

"You're going to stay right where you are," Roger said with mock severity, "even if I have to sit on your lap to hold you down."

Margie laughed and relaxed. She would explain to the old lady later, she promised herself.

Roger ran his hand lightly down the length of her fair hair, and the tenderness of his touch brought a hard lump into her throat. She turned and looked into the fire, unable to meet his clear brown eyes. How he would despise her if he knew how she was planning to ruin his life. And getting paid for it.

The little old lady, who said her name was Miss Kimble, came fluttering back into the room.

"I've put the kettle on," she said, and a moment later produced a bottle of blackberry wine. She beamed innocently. "Ordinarily, I don't hold with folks drinking, but I think it makes us all happier to be a little bit wicked once in a while."

When they had each had their allotted thimbleful of wine, she carefully wrapped the bottle in a towel and hid it in the bottom of a huge cedar chest.

Later she set the coffee table before the fire and served them green tea and gingerbread with whipped cream. She sat down in the old-fashioned rocking chair near the fire. She leaned back her head and closed her eyes.

"Listen to the rain," she murmured. "Sometimes on a night like this I fancy Zeb comes in out of the storm and sits by the fire with me. It's real comfortin', havin' him here."

PANIC tightened in Margie's throat. She had to stop Miss Kimble from going into her act. But how could she tell the old lady she had the wrong couple without turning traitor to Lillian? It was too late now. Margie clenched her small hands together in her lap and waited in an agony of guilt.

There was a puzzled frown on Roger's forehead. "Zeb?" he echoed.

Miss Kimble seemed not to hear. Her eyes were closed, and there was a tender, dreamy look on her face. The fire danced on the hearth, and rain drummed on the roof. A clock ticked on the mantle.

"Seems only yesterday when Zeb came a courtin' me," she went on in a low voice that sounded like the whispering rustle of paper. "He was the hired hand on the Jensens' farm, and there wasn't a handsomer man in the whole country. Come Sunday meetin', and all the young girls would sit in church and flirt with him over

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their hymn books. But Zeb wasn't a flirtin' man. He loved me.

"But Zeb was as stubborn as a mule and so proud, you kept expectin' to see the buttons pop off his waistcoat. My father was the richest man for a hundred miles around, and Zeb was too stubborn proud to marry a rich man's daughter. He was afraid people would think he was marryin' me for my money. A fool's pride, that's what it was."

From beneath her lashes Margie stole a glance at Roger's clean, strong profile. His gaze rested on Miss Kimble's face, and there was a gentle, pitying expression on his features. Margie groaned inwardly. He believed the old lady's story, and it was all a trumped up lie.

She bit her lower lip to keep from blurting out the truth to him. What a rotten trick this was. If he ever found out that the old lady was an actress, he would never have faith in anyone again. And he would hate Margie. A film of hot tears stung her eyes. She bowed her head, and tried to shut out the old lady's next words, but they came to her, each word wreathed in a tear drop.

"I kept hopin' to hear my Zeb ask me to marry him, but he held silent too long. It was on a night just such as this that he took a shortcut along the lake bank to come courtin' me. But a piece of the bank gave way beneath him, and I never saw him alive again. I was only nineteen then, and I could have had other beaus. But true love comes only once in a lifetime. There can be no happy substitute for it. And if Zeb were alive today, he would be the first to admit his foolishness in letting money come between us."

The old lady's voice faded away into nothingness. The rocking chair creaked, and rain dripped from the eaves.

This was where Lillian would have looked mistily at Roger, her eyes telling him that her money wasn't important enough to keep them apart.

Margie dared not look at him. And suddenly she was glad that all her carefully laid plans had gone amiss. She was glad that Lillian wasn't here to make Roger fall in love with her. As soon as they got back to the cottage she would tell Lillian to keep her thousand dollars. Roger was much too fine to be bought. And after she had told Lillian off, Margie was going to tell Toby that it was all off between them, too.

She knew that the old lady was just putting on an act, but still an ache had come in Margie's throat, just listening to her. An aching loneliness. Because all at once, while listening to her story, she had realized that she and Toby weren't really in love. And to think that if she hadn't come here tonight, she would have married him and have been unhappy the rest of her life!

THE SILENCE had deepened until the popping of sparks from the logs sounded like firecrackers going off. Margie had the breathless, excited feeling that Roger was looking at her. But she couldn't bring herself to raise her eyes to his face and find out.

Miss Kimble stirred as if she had been napping. "You must pardon an old lady's dreamin'," she said. "My memories of love are all I have left." She picked up a china tea cup. "Would you like me to read your tea leaves?"

"No," Margie cried, a little too emphatically.

"Yes," Roger said.

Margie clasped her hands together and stared into the flames, defeated. In a few minutes now it would all be over. Then they could all relax and be themselves once more.

"I look into both of your tea cups," the old lady said, "and I see a song. The words and the notes of a song. You can separate them, mate the words with other music. But something is wrong. They

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don't belong together. The lilt, the happy harmony is gone. We have lost the delicate beauty that we find only when the words and notes of a song belong together as one."

She looked up. "You, my children, are like the words and the notes of that song. You belong together. Without each other you are nothing." She rose to her feet. "And now I think I will go to my room. I'm so very tired."

Margie continued to stare into the flames, her face white. Why was Roger so tense and quiet? Didn't he know that there was no truth in fortune telling? Why didn't he laugh it off? Wisecrack?

She felt the pull of his eyes on her face, commanding her to look at him. Slowly she turned toward him and lifted her lashes.

SHE LOOKED straight into his eyes, and she felt as if an electric shock had torn through her body. She was trembling. The palms of her hands were damp. He was looking at her with his heart laid bare in his eyes, and suddenly she knew that she loved him, too. She knew that it was true. They were like the words and music of a song. They belonged together.

Unsteadily she got to her feet. She had to tell him that he had been tricked. The old lady would have said the same words and have created the same magic spell if he had come here with Lillian, as they had originally planned. But the words wouldn't come out. Her throat was dry as cotton.

Roger was on his feet, too, towering above her. His lean face was still and tight with emotion. He reached out his arms and drew her against him. His hard lips closed over hers with an urgency that left her shaken.

A brutal blast of wind, a cold shower of rain brought her back to earth with a shock. The front door was wide open, and Lillian was standing there, her eyes shooting sparked lightning.

"I thought so!" she cried, and advanced on them in a cold fury. She whirled on Roger. "Do you know who Margie is? She's Pamela Powell, the gal who knows all the angles on how to get a husband. She planned this whole thing. That sweet little old lady who read you the riot act on love is an actress. She was paid to come here and say those lines and put on an act. It was all a scheme to make you fall in love with our little Margie. She's made a fool of you, Roger!"

Margie blanched. Hot words of denial formed on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to cry out that it was she who had been made a fool of. She had been caught in her own trap.

But what was the use of explanations? The shock in Roger's eyes was all she needed to tell her she'd lost him forever.

She turned and ran out through the open door, splashing stocking-footed through the puddles. Somehow she managed, in spite of her blinding tears, to get in the station wagon and start the motor. The back wheel whirred and settled deeper into the mud. Margie put her head down on the steering wheel and began to sob.

"Are you deliberately trying to catch cold so I'll have to sit up with you all night?" Roger asked sternly.

He got in the car beside her. Margie never knew just how it happened, but suddenly she had both arms around his neck and was pressing her wet cheek to his.

"It's true," she sobbed. "I planned the whole thing. The old lady is an actress, and I—"

"Shhh!" Roger said. "You talk too much."

And he closed her lips with a kiss.

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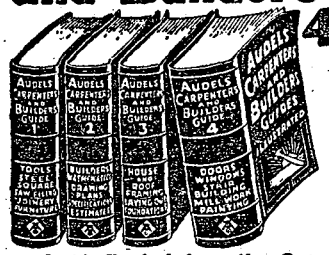

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ALL-STORY LOVE

(Continued from page 31)

he wanted. He was through, now, with her. He hated her.

"What did you mean?" he repeated hoarsely.

"What did you mean, when you said you'd lost more than you'd won?" she asked, not daring to hope.

"What do you think? I won my point and lost my love."

"Your love." Her voice was wondering. "But you said you weren't in love with Elly Holmes."

"I'm not in love with Elly Holmes. She was a kid—a gallant, mixed-up, mistaken, loyal, heroic kid. I'm in love with a woman. I'm in love with a girl who could go through seven years of hell and still stay soft. A girl who could work in a gambling joint and wear daring gowns and paint her mouth to look like a hussy—and still stay heartbreakingly soft and sweet. I'm in love with a girl named Velvet."

"Don't try to be polite," he said angrily. "You don't owe me anything. I'll take you to John Temple."

"I'm not in love with John. That was what Marilyn said. That was what John thought. I must have acted like a terrible fool to make him think I was in love with him, to make him so embarrassed that he would stay away from home and ruin his life. I did what I did because Marilyn said I'd ruined their lives by being in love with her husband. But it wasn't true. I wasn't in love with him then and I'm not in love with him now. I'm in love with you."

"I asked you once to marry me," he said, "and you said no. So I'll ask you again. Will you marry me?"

There had never been such glory as shone then in Velvet's eyes.

"Yes."

He leaned over and stripped off the scarlet velvet gloves she wore and threw them out the window. He kissed her slim bare hands. Then he kissed her mouth.

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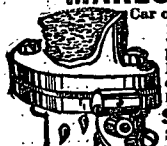

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(Continued from page 47)

two-timing was the real reason she had stopped wanting to live. But of course if there was a chance he was right, I wanted justice done. Because I knew that originally Mildred had loved Chris."

Lisa shivered. She didn't even know she spoke. "And so you began to look around for someone who might have worn that bracelet?"

REMEMBERING, he frowned and his mouth tightened in distaste. "I began with Chris's chauffeur. Money loosened his tongue and I learned he had driven Chris to the Latin Casino quite often to see a pin-up gal that had caught his fancy there. An evening or two at the Casino, a few drinks at the bar and I discovered that one of the dancing stars had mysteriously dropped out of the floor show on the very evening that Mildred had died. I believed I was getting warm so I trailed the gal's dancing partner and after a day or two of shadowing him he led me out to Poinciana Road and you, Lisa."

His voice broke and for a moment he stopped speaking. Then after a while he went on, "Your isolating yourself in the country right after Mildred's death made me doubly sure there was something between you and Chris, and I meant to find out just what it was. That's why I kept after you, tried to make love to you and flatter you."

Lisa quivered, wondered how she could go on living when her whole world lay in a shattered heap at her feet. "I'll tell you anything I can," she murmured tonelessly.

Bruce swung around incredulously. "But you still don't understand, do you, Lisa?" he demanded.

"Understand what?"

Impatiently he jerked her to her feet, raised her face to his. "Why in the devil

(Please turn to page 128)

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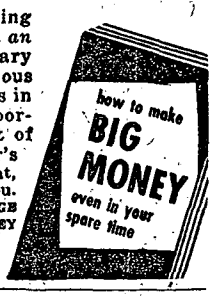

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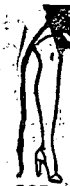

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(Continued from page 126)

do you think I never mailed that letter you found to my lawyer after I'd written it? What do you imagine I meant when I held you in my arms this morning?"

His eyes told her things she mustn't believe. "I—I don't know," she faltered. Suddenly she felt bewildered.

"You don't know!" Possessively his arms tightened, crushed her breathlessly close. "Because I love you, have loved you from the first moment I met you in the garden that day. Only I was afraid to trust you. But slowly, even though I fought against it, you won. And now I know that whatever existed between you and Chris that drove you into hiding it wasn't your fault. Because you're fine and sweet and straight—and so excitingly beautiful."

"Oh, Bruce." Relief made her weak and she clung to him limply. She couldn't understand everything yet. It had all happened too fast. But as long as Bruce held her in his arms she wasn't afraid anymore.

Somewhere ahead of them the engineer was sending the train speeding forward into the night. But one day they would return to Poinciana Road. Only this time her heart would be overflowing with peace and happiness, knowing that the scarlet-lined highway was leading her straight into paradise—and that it was to be hers for today, tomorrow and forever.

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HIRED HANDFUL

(Continued from page 66)

"Oh—" Her face flushed as she looked around. She laughed. "You're such a good dancer."

"Thanks." He tried to grin. "Fred hasn't showed up yet."

"We'll wait a few minutes longer." She glanced away. "If you don't mind?"

"Of course not." Steve held the chair for her. "I've been thinking, Marilyn, we should do this right. I could come for you a few times at the store, pick you up when you get through work."

"Would you?" Her smile wavered. "I hoped that maybe you'd help. I—" The smile faded and she shook her head. "Oh, Steve, I can't pretend, not with you. I can't put on an act." She dropped her voice. "Fred won't be here. I'm not expecting him."

"You—you're not? You don't? You—" He took her hands. "Marilyn—"

"Well, I had to have some excuse to come to you after you made me see what a silly little fool I was about Fred. I thought, if you thought— I mean, maybe we could be friends. Maybe—"

Laughing, he reached across the table and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her and the drums came loud and the trumpets with their love song. His laughter stilled against the huskiness that made his words a whisper. "I know what you mean," Steve said. But he kept his grin.

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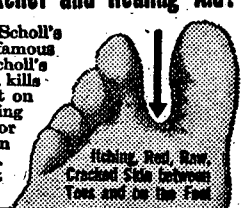

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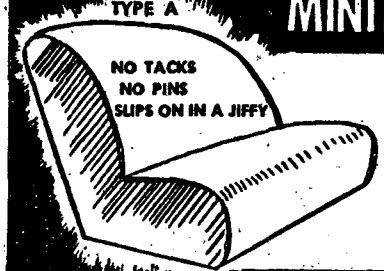

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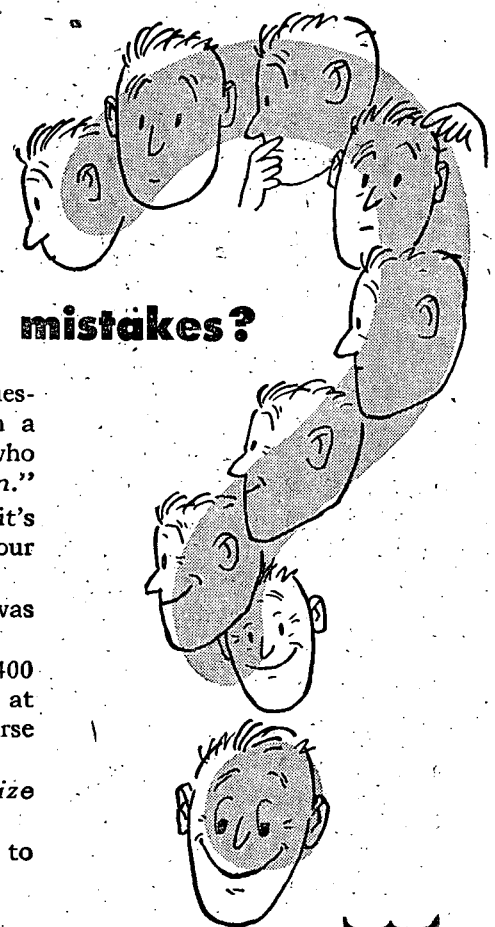

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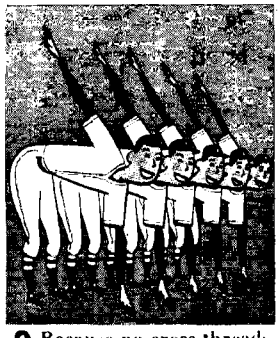

3 **Because no cross-threads** hinder the action of B. F. Goodrich tire cords, they work *in rythm* like the athletes above. Carry impact from one to another, smother road shock, reduce wear, cushion bumps.

4 **Note how** cords of most tires are bunched and gapped by slender cross-threads. Result: weak spots, "slacker" cords, overworked cords. BFG cords, instead, are sealed in rubber, with uniform spacing and tension.

5 **Only B. F. Goodrich** has the equipment and skills to give you "rythmic-flexing cords" in every tire for every need. Buy today. See your B. F. Goodrich dealer. The B. F. Goodrich Company, Akron, O.

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